THE MAN WITH THE BROODING EYES

John Goodwin

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THE MAN WITH THE BROODING EYES

BY

JOHN GOODWIN Pseud.

[Sidney Floyd Gowing]

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CHAPTER I

THE LATE LAMENTED

"GENTLEMEN," said Mr. Callaghan, "I will declare a dividend."

He opened a morocco case and laid a neat pile of bank-notes on the lacquer table beside him. Mr. Callaghan's air was that of a company-promoter presenting an unsatisfactory balance-sheet. Polishing his spectacles gently with a silk handkerchief, he replaced them. His long white hand lifted a number of notes from the pile and laid them on one side.

"Vaille, two hundred pounds."

Vaille, dark and languid, admirably dressed, folded the notes with slender fingers and placed them in his pocket-book. There was a slightly contemptuous expression in his eyes.

"Drummond, two hundred and fifty pounds."

Harold Drummond, smart, fair-haired, and debonair, took his share with a smile.

"Thank you, Chief," he said genially.

"Slaney, three hundred pounds."

Slaney, though his share was the largest, showed obvious discontent. His face was sharp and peaked, his speech and appearance vulgar. His small pale eyes were remarkably intelligent and suspicious. He had watched grudgingly the distribution of notes to his companions.

"It's little enough for the work I did and the risk I took," he said sullenly.

The delightful benevolence in Mr. Callaghan's face suddenly vanished as if it had been wiped out with a sponge. His eyes became like points of hard crystal that bored into Slaney's and made the man shrink back as if he had been struck. There was silence for several moments.

"I beg your pardon, Mr. Slaney," said Callaghan slowly, "have you any comments to make?"

"No, Chief," said Slaney huskily, "none."

The amiable expression returned to Callaghan's eyes, and he smiled slightly. But for a moment it was as though a mask had been lifted to show his soul, and with it such a power as none of the other men in that room dared face.

"Bell, one hundred and fifty pounds."

Mr. Bell, in black clothes of a semi-clerical cut, took the notes reverently in his plump white hands. He had the air of murmuring a blessing as he placed the money softly in his breast pocket.

"And that," said Mr. Callaghan, filling himself a glass of port from the Venetian decanter at his side, "is absolutely all." He lay back and put the tips of his fingers together. "A more grossly unsatisfactory affair, my friends, I have never put before you.

"That money which—with certain deductions—I have divided among you was realized by the sale in Amsterdam of the Wertstein diamond chaplet. It is as much as we could expect. The greater prize for which we laid our plans, Lady Wertstein's rubies—worth twenty and thirty times this trivial sum—that prize we failed to acquire. It is now for ever beyond our reach. We have all of us, my friends, run the gravest risk of our careers: a risk now happily put an end to. And we have lost one of our most active partners."

"It is all over, I suppose, Chief?" asked Drummond.

"All over," said Callaghan, drawing an evening paper from his pocket. "You have not seen this? I will read you the account."

Mr. Callaghan adjusted the silver-rimmed spectacles on his nose, stretched himself luxuriously in the easy-chair, folded back the paper, and read aloud in a pleasant, scholarly voice, enunciating his words clearly. His companions listened in dead silence.

MARDYKE EXECUTED

GOES SILENTLY TO THE SCAFFOLD

Robert Mardyke, sentenced recently at the New Bailey for the Park Crescent murder and safe robbery (in which Sir Isidor Wertstein was shot dead in his own house), was executed at ten o'clock this morning in Blexton Prison.

The condemned man, when informed that the fatal day had arrived, received the news calmly. On being taken

to the execution-yard, he listened courteously to the exhortation of the chaplain. He declined to make any statement, and merely requested that he might be neither pinioned nor blindfolded. He walked on to the drop-platform with a firm step.

The prison doctor subsequently reported that death had been instantaneous.

Vaille's slim fingers wandered involuntarily to his neck, and caressed it softly. He gave an artistic shudder.

"How very crude," he murmured.

A little hush fell on the room. Drummond was the first to move. With a steady hand he poured out five brimming glasses from the ruby fluid in the decanter.

"On your feet, gentlemen," he said quietly. "Let us drink to the memory of our departed brother and his admirable gift of silence—now, alas, eternal. Robert Mardyke."

The assembly rose like one man. Four raised their glasses gravely and emptied them. Mr. Callaghan took no more than a sip from his, and, turning deliberately, faced a portrait that hung over the old oak mantelpiece.

"Since we are drinking to the dead," he said in a louder voice, "I drink to one who was greater than us all. Jim Carey! Ah! if he had been alive to undertake that job, there would have been no failure! He was the king of our profession—a giant, among pigmies. Even I, high though I stand among you, am proud to have been his comrade and disciple. Slim Jim Carey—master of his trade—wanted by

the police of three continents, and none of them could run him to earth or guess his true identity. Dead, ten months ago, in an obscure French village—and no monument to his fame, save his memory here in our hearts. I drink to the mighty dead!"

He drained his glass, and sank despondently into the arm-chair.

"We shall never look upon his like again," he said mournfully.

There was a murmur of assent from the four men. For a moment all eyes were turned upon the picture. It was the work of a master of portraiture, showing the head and shoulders of a man with a refined, well-chiselled face, straight nose, and a neat, pointed brown beard. The moustache failed to hide entirely the cruel corners of the mouth, but the forehead was high and intellectual, and the nostrils delicately curved. But the all-mastering feature was the eyes —wide, keen, and deep blue, with lights in them like the lights in a king-opal. They had the brooding stare that is seen in the eyes of the great birds of prey.

Vaille broke the silence.

"All this is true," he said, "but Jim Carey cannot help us now. Chief," he said earnestly, "what is to be our next move? We must strike a new line. Under your favour, we must change our methods utterly. None of us are cowards, I hope, but we have escaped a great danger, and only your skill has pulled us through. Our coffers are low."

"Vaille's right," said Drummond decisively. "I'll play with any stakes, Chief, but I object to gambling my neck for coppers."

"What we want's a soft job," said Slaney, helping himself to brandy, "a soft, sure job, with big money in it."

"Aye," said the clerical-looking Mr. Bell softly, "a dripping roast that will provide a banquet for the faithful. But, my brethren, such things are hard to come by."

Callaghan leaned forward impressively, his hands on the arms of his chair.

"My friends," he said with an air of gentle triumph, "I have it ready for you! A magnificent coup—safe, profitable, and almost inexhaustible. A sponge —" he made a grasping gesture with his large white hand—"a sponge which, artistically but ruthlessly squeezed, will exude such a river of gold as you never dreamed of!" He licked his thin lips. "A trick of fortune has placed it within my reach, and yours. It is the chance of a lifetime!"

There was a ring in Callaghan's tone that was like a summons to battle. The others gathered round him eagerly.

"Chief," said Drummond admiringly. "This sounds like business."

"What is it?" asked Vaille. "A bank? A company? A rich man with a secret that would ruin him?"

"It is better than any of these," said Mr. Callaghan softly. "It is a woman."

The others glanced at each other. Their satisfaction increased. Mr. Callaghan rubbed his hands together gently.

"My friends," he said, "there is nothing so

profitable as a woman—properly handled. A woman has fewer defences than a man. And she is much more marketable. Now listen to me, and you shall hear what this heaven-sent source of income is."

He lifted a finger and pointed to the portrait over the fire-place.

"You know many things. But does any one of you know who Slim Jim really was? His name, and his origin?"

There was silence.

"You do not. You know half a dozen *aliases* that fitted him, but as to who the man was, you are all ignorant. I believe I am the only person living that does know, and I will tell you."

Mr. Callaghan leaned forward in his chair.

"His name, on the birth-registers of his county, is William Travers Tallbois, and were he living at this moment he would be a peer of England, with an estate and over a million sterling." Mr. Callaghan paused impressively, and his voice dropped. "He leaves behind him a daughter—an only child."

There was a stir of amazement among the partners. Vaille's eyes grew dark with excitement.

"Is she the woman, Chief!" he exclaimed.

"She is the woman," said Callaghan softly, "of whom I spoke."

A flash of understanding came into the eyes of the four. Mr. Callaghan saw it, and smiled succulently.

"Is it not stupendous, gentlemen?" he said in gentle tones. "You see the immense possibilities that lie before us! That you may comprehend fully

I will give you, very briefly, a snapshot history of Slim Jim and his daughter."

Mr. Callaghan took off his spectacles, holding them in his fingers and emphasizing his points with them.

"William Travers Tallbois, born 1877, was a second cousin of the ninth Viscount Tallbois of Knayth. In his twenty-first year, William, then far removed from any hope of the title, disgraced himself utterly, in London. He was shipped to Florida by his family, who hoped they had seen the last of him. His ship went down, twenty miles off Key West. William was not among the survivors. The news of his death was received with resignation by his family. And so William Tallbois passes from history."

Mr. Callaghan took an appreciative sip of his port, and continued:

"I believe no one living but myself knows the true facts. William Tallbois was not drowned. He was picked up by a coaster, landed in Florida, sunk his identity, and became a wanderer on the face of the earth. He developed his inbred talents, and in the course of years became the brilliant scoundrel whom we all knew and admired—Slim Jim Carey.

"Soon after his arrival in America, Slim Jim married. Marriage was a recurring weakness of his. His earliest experiment, perhaps, was at Calcarth, South Georgia, where he married a woman named Lloyd. She died, after giving birth to a daughter. That daughter still lives.

"The child was taken charge of by one Janet Mackellar, a 'school-marm' in a back-blocks settle-

ment—a hard, dour, upright woman. She was greatly attached to the child. So was Slim Jim. I think she was the only living creature he ever loved or respected. At intervals of his career he would return and visit her. He dared only do so under an *alias*—Georgia was too hot to hold him. The child—his own child—did not know him as father, but called him 'uncle.' These are the little penalties of our profession.

"And so the child grew to be a woman. Janet Mackellar must always have suspected Slim Jim's trade. She hated and feared him. Discovering the truth about him one day, she disappeared, taking the girl with her. They came to Charleston, and afterwards to London."

"To London?" exclaimed Drummond.

Mr. Callaghan nodded.

"By then, the girl was seventeen. Jim tried to trace them, and failed. The outbreak of war prevented him. Badly wanted by the English police, Slim Jim enlisted in the Foreign Legion of France—either to escape arrest, or with some absurd idea that he was called upon to fight for his country because others were doing so—some curious kink in his mind, which this super-rascal called his honour. He served four years, and was killed in the Argonne just before the final advance. The girl," said Callaghan slowly. "is now in this city."

The others were about to break out with a clamour of eager questions, but Callaghan held up his hand.

"Wait!" he said; "that you may understand fully the superb opportunity that lies ready to our hands,

I will read you a brief item from this same newspaper that records the demise of our comrade."

Once more Mr. Callaghan unfolded the evening paper.

DEATH OF LORD TALLBOIS

"Viscount Tallbois died last night at Knayth Abbey, aged eighty-three, after a brief illness.

"The deceased peer was 9th Viscount Tallbois of Knayth and 22d Baron Knayth, in the peerage of England. In his youth he served in the Army, but for many years has lived quietly as a country gentleman.

"Knayth Abbey, a superb Tudor house, overlooking the Thames Valley near Clievemead, Berkshire, is well-known as the chief show-place in the county. The income from the estates is very large, and is understood to be entailed.

"There appears, however, to be no heir. Viscount Tallbois leaves no children, and his three nephews fell in the Great War. Thus an ancient and historic house comes to an end."

Mr. Callaghan laid down the paper. A little gurgling laugh of satisfaction broke from him.

"For once, the Press slips up!" he said. "Gentlemen, let us congratulate our Old Nobility. There is still a claimant to the glories of Knayth—the only child of our late lamented comrade, Slim Jim. Were he living now, the gallows would stand between him and his estates. But the title descends in the female line! The girl is Viscountess Tallbois of Knayth with £70,000 a year—the daughter of a dead thief!"

There was a swift burst of applause from the four.

"Chief!" exclaimed Vaille, his eyes bright with greed. "We're on the biggest coup in history! Have you the proofs?"

"Complete!" said Callaghan, "and beyond question. We shall sell them—at a price. A price that will tax even the Tallbois estate. We shall set this jail-bird princess on her throne, and then, since we alone know her dead father's record, we've got her in a net from which there's no escape."

Drummond laughed unpleasantly.

"I am glad that I am not a woman," he said suavely, "and still more glad that I am not our late friend's daughter. She knows, obviously, nothing whatever of her identity or her claim, nor does the good Janet. But do you yourself know even the name that the girl passes under? Can you find her? London is a big place."

"In a few days," said Callaghan with brisk confidence, "we shall lay our hands on her. My plans are already made. I have clues to Janet Mackellar; we have but to find Janet, and we've got the girl—who, moreover, has to earn her living and will be engaged in some sort of clerical work, as I know already. That narrows the search. Above all I have one invaluable clue, which I obtained from Jim Carey—without his knowledge. The girl's photograph, taken a year or two back. Here it is."

The other men pressed round eagerly to view it.

The photograph showed a girl of about eighteen. Her eyes were large and dark, with a strangely wistful, appealing expression. She looked little more than a child. The face was delicately beautiful, but

the full, tender curve of the lips gave promise of hidden passion that would develop with the years. It was an elfin face—such a face as men see in the garden of dreams.

"Nothing of Slim Jim there!" said Vaille, "and yet—I don't know. Those eyes——"

"No, no!" said Mr. Bell softly. "Tender—honest—virginal—and poor. All the qualities, Chief, which we most wish to find." He chuckled, and took the photograph in his fat white hands. The dress was cheap and unbecoming, yet not tawdry.

"A bit of stuff that might have been made for us," said Slaney, licking his lips. "And now, Chief—what orders?"

"You, Vaille," said Mr. Callaghan, "will take that photo, make four copies, and start your search at once on lines I shall lay down for you. Drummond, you will make your task the tracing of Janet Mackellar, and there also I am able to put you on a scent. I myself will investigate actively." He turned to Slaney.

"For you, Slaney, I have a much more specialized rôle. I shall obtain you a man-servant's situation at Knayth Abbey, which you will take up forthwith. It is a little difficult, as they are now reducing their staff, but I have had this in view some time; I have arranged an opening there for you. Your task will be to possess yourself of all possible inside information concerning the Tallbois family and the Knayth household before it breaks up. You will hold the inner line of communications."

"It's a job that's just made for me, Chief," said Slaney, rubbing his hands, "I shall fairly eat it!"

"You will not forget," said Mr. Callaghan coldly, "that you are a gentleman's gentleman. And Lord help you," he added with a steely flash in his eyes, "if you fail me! Now, my friends, to work."

"Wait, Chief!" said Drummond eagerly, "you've not settled the plan. Surely one thing stands out like a beacon—one of us ought to corner the girl and marry her before an inkling of all this comes out! Make sure of her. It's a chance in a million. And easy enough," he said gently, "for one of this party."

"You see yourself enthroned at Knayth, as Prince Consort, eh?" sneered Vaille.

"No!" said Callaghan sharply, and he struck the table with his fist. "I absolutely forbid that! It is no part of the plan. Cast it from your minds. And mark you this!" he said, thrusting his head forward, "the man who married that girl would make the poorest bargain in London! He would find himself left."

There was dead silence.

"I have a second coup in view," said Callaghan slowly, "when the first is accomplished. A coup that will come as a thunderbolt, and will enrich us beyond anything you dream of getting from this first campaign. But until the time comes, I shall keep that strictly to myself. Your part is to obey!"

"The Chief's right," said Vaille after a pause, "the game's in his hands. We want no bungling. Before the week's out we'll get hold of this charming young person."

"Remembering always," said Callaghan, "that her life is our greatest and most profitable asset. We

have to preserve and protect it," he added benevolently, "against all things untoward."

"But her name—her honour—her innocence—" murmured Vaille ironically as he filled his glass.

Mr. Callaghan's mobile lips drew back in a smile that showed two long eye-teeth.

"All these we shall assess at their market value," he said gently.

CHAPTER II

A CASE IN CHAMBERS

THE click and rattle of twenty typewriters echoed through the long, hot room. An intrusive sunbeam, shooting through an upper window, gilded the heads of the girls as they bent over the keyboards, and lit up their hair. A marvellous diversity of hair—chestnut, yellow, black, peroxide-blonde, and in one case, flaming red.

On the street windows was the legend, whimsically reversed when seen backwards through the panes:

PUTTOCK & COPES
LAW & COMMERCIAL TYPEWRITING

Joan Ayre, the youngest of Miss Puttock's employees, sat at the end of the farther row, her fingers tapping the keys of a Remington with dizzy speed. She was not only the youngest, but the prettiest girl in the room.

It was a charming, tender little face that bent over the machine; a face of a perfect oval, with a clear, rather pale skin that heightened the redness of the curved lips. Her fingers were very slender and white. Her bright brown hair was drawn back too tightly, plaited in a neat but unattractive mat at the back of her head; her blouse was of stiff linen, very

plain beside the startling confections worn by the more dashing employees of Puttock & Copes.

Presently Joan ceased typing and sat back with a little sigh. A wistful, pensive expression came over her face, as though something had happened which was puzzling her. She fell into a brief day-dream. But day-dreams are not permitted in typing-offices, and the harsh voice of her employer called her back to the present.

"Miss Ayre! Come here, please, and take Mr. Mottisfont's instructions."

Joan rose hastily and crossed to the desk where stood the angular Miss Puttock, beside a valued customer who had just entered.

His arrival was greeted by a slight pause in the rattle of the machines, for most of the girls glanced up from their work. Philip Mottisfont, barrister-at-law, was so strikingly good-looking, and almost miraculously well-dressed. His clothes sat upon him naturally, like the hide on a thoroughbred horse.

He was tall and well-built, his features finely cut, his age not more than thirty; short, yellow-gold hair with a crisp ripple over the temples made him look younger still. His eyes were light blue and frankly supercilious, with an expression that bade his fellow-creatures stand aloof. They were mitigated by a sensitive mouth.

Joan glanced at him a little timidly, and her pale cheeks became faintly pink. Mr. Mottisfont greeted her with a pleasant smile.

"It is a shame to drive you like this, Miss Ayre,"

he said apologetically, "but no one else types my work so well as you; you understand just what I want. It is urgently needed by six o'clock. Can you manage it?"

As they bent their heads over the brief while Mottisfont explained his needs, Joan Ayre was conscious of a curious thrill of pleasure. Once their hands touched, accidentally, while turning over the pages. She was faintly confused, conscious that her heart was beating faster.

"There is a great deal of it," murmured Joan, "but I will get it through in time."

They both looked up from the desk, and were facing each other. For a moment Mottisfont did not reply. He was gazing straight into the girl's eyes—wonderful eyes, a deep, vivid violet.

"Thank you so much," he said smiling, "I know I can always rely on you."

He made her a courteous bow, and left the room. Joan sat down at her desk. Almost unconsciously despite herself, her eyes followed the tall, commanding figure that passed out through the door. Then quickly she bent to the work he had given her and began to type at a bewildering pace.

There was another girl in the room whose gaze followed Mottisfont's exist; her hair was flaming red, and she watched him go with a sullen, baleful stare.

Mottisfont was quite unconscious of it. Always a brisk mover, he was already clear of Temple Chambers, and with a swinging stride passed under the old gate into the Temple Gardens. A few minutes' walk brought him to his chambers in Fountain Court;

he opened the oak with his latch-key and entered the front room.

There were no more luxurious rooms in the whole Temple. Mottisfont's taste was admirably refined. Several exhibition pieces of Jacobean furniture stood round the panelled walls, that were hung with old prints, gems of their kind. A wealth of flowers brightened the room, a thick Turkey carpet covered the floor. An antique bureau held a library of law books bound in fine calf; on a little stand was a barrister's wig. Mottisfont opened a drawer, and spread a brief on the window-table, making ready to work.

But for a moment he hesitated, staring thoughtfully before him through the window. Mottisfont, the most brilliant of the younger men at the Bar, pointed to already as a man with his feet well on the lower rungs of the ladder of Fame, seemed to be seized with a rare indecision of mind. The vision of a gentle, wistful face and two deep violet eyes floated before his own, and held him like a talisman.

"How charming she is," he said to himself, "and —how amazingly dowdy! Yet I've never seen, in my own world, a woman to compare with her! Why do I take my typing to that place every time? Is it just for the chance of seeing and speaking to her?"

He shook himself, and laughed grimly.

"Ambition—the rocky, upward path! Let me have done with this folly. If ever I marry, and I've little enough will to that, it must be to a partner of some wealth and position—one who can help me on the way up, not a drag upon my feet." He sighed

a little wearily, then suddenly tightened his lips and sat down to his work.

For two hours he applied himself strenuously to the brief, making notes, working with the swift, keen grasp of a difficult problem that was natural to him. A man-servant in neat black livery—a rare thing in the Temple, where charwomen known as "laundresses" are usually the inefficient hand-maidens—came in and laid tea, setting a rare old silver urn on the snowy cloth, and piling a bright fire with cedar logs.

Both the inner door and the oak stood open. There was a ring at the bell, and Philip, rising quickly, saw Joan Ayre standing at the entrance with a package.

"Is that the work, Miss Ayre?" he exclaimed, "thank you so much. Come in, won't you?"

Joan walked in simply and without hesitation. The charm of the room and the flowers filled her with wonder.

"Miss Puttock told me to bring you the stuff directly it was ready," she said.

"Splendid! But what a shame to make you run errands. Let me give you some tea," he said, pouring her out a cup. The man-servant gave a sidelong glance at Philip and left the room, closing the door silently.

"It's complete," said Joan, laying down the package, "I hope you'll find it in order."

"Your work is sure to be in perfect order," he said, smiling. "I'm very grateful to you. It was a big job."

Again, as they faced each other, Joan felt a flutter at her heart. Mottisfont was looking at her with

extraordinary intentness. And then, for a moment, the cool and self-contained barrister seemed to lose his head. He stepped towards her suddenly with hands outstretched, and a look in his eyes such as Joan had seen in the eyes of men before. She stepped back, and her face flamed as though she had been struck.

Mottisfont stopped dead. His cheeks reddened, and his hands dropped slowly to his sides.

"I beg your pardon," he said humbly, and a little hoarsely. "Forgive me. I—I thought you looked tired."

Joan lifted her chin, and raised her eyes to his with a steady, cool gaze.

"It is no hardship for me to be tired," she said quietly. "I have to work for my living, you see."

Joan seemed quite unlike her customary timid self. She gave him an extraordinarily dignified little bow, and turning, left the chambers without a word. Philip remained standing motionless by the table, his only company the cup of untasted tea.

On the staircase Joan was hurrying downwards, a stifled sob in her throat, and her eyes were misty. Reaching the Embankment she boarded a tram, and in half-an-hour was in the dingy bed-sitting-room, on a top floor south of the water, which she called home. It contained a rickety table, two cheap chairs, and two iron bedsteads behind a rough curtain.

Joan was calmer when she reached this refuge. She stood by the window and reflected. A doubt came into her mind—had she made a mistake? Joan was utterly inexperienced. Had Mr. Mottis-

font really thought that she might fall? She *was* very tired—she remembered feeling strangely dizzy. Had she merely made a fool of herself by her indignation? If so, what must he think of her? Her cheeks flushed.

"Am I so vulgar," she said aloud, "that I see vulgarity where there is none? He would not attempt such a thing. He is a gentleman."

"Who's a gentleman!" said a sharp, Cockney voice as the door swung open. The red-haired girl from Puttock & Copes entered briskly. She took off her poppy-covered hat and slung it on the bed. "Thank goodness we've done with the rotten office till Tuesday —hooray! Now for a beano! Why didn't you wait for me, old dear?"

Most of the young ladies at Puttock & Copes regarded Emmie Clegg as "low." She was short, with an ample figure, hard, humorous eyes, an impudent little retroussé nose, and was violent in her speech. But Joan had no sense of social values at all. She loved Emmie for the absurdly inadequate reason that Emmie had shown her both affection and kindness, and had obtained her the berth at Puttock's when she was without work or money. The girls lived together.

"I had to deliver some work, Emmie; I couldn't stop," said Joan.

Emmie frowned suddenly.

"Work?" she said. "Where to? Not to Mottisfont's?" She glanced quickly at the clock, and then at her friend. "Joan, you didn't go into his rooms!" she said sharply, with a note of alarm.

"I delivered the work," said Joan quietly. Emmie stepped right up to her.

"What are you blushin' like that for! What were you talking to yourself about, when I come in? A 'gentleman,' you said—I heard you! A gentleman!" repeated Emmie with extraordinary bitterness. "I hate him an' all his tribe! They looks on such as us as dirt under their feet—or worse! Mottisfont! Good-lookin', an' knows it—and a swell! If ever I see you talkin' to him, I'll come an' drag you out of it by the hair of your head! You're so simple you barely know your right hand from your left!"

An amazing fury took possession of Emmie. Her flaming hair shook.

"Look at me, Joan!" she said, flinging wide her arms. "I ain't much to look at now. But if I told you how a swell once treated me, the hearin' of it would turn you sick! Some day you shall know." Her voice shook. "Swells!"

Her voice became hoarse.

"Listen to me, while I talk straight!" she cried, putting her hands on Joan's shoulders. "Mottisfont isn't our class. I'd sooner kill you than see you friendly with him or his lot. No good comes of that. It only leads to—rottenness."

Joan, very white, sank into a chair. The two girls stared at each other. Suddenly Emmie's voice broke, she fell on her knees beside Joan, and put both her arms round her.

"I'm sorry, Joan," said Emmie, nearly crying, "I don't know what's the matter with me. You aren't angry with me, are you? Say you aren't angry!"

"Angry with you dear!" said Joan softly, and kissed her. "Of course not."

Emmie snuffled, and passed a sleeve over one eye.

"That's just the darling you are, Joan. Any other girl'd have told me to mind my own business, an' turned me off."

She stood up.

"Forgive me, Joan. And look here, you're coming up the river with me tonight. It's Bank holiday week. Three whole days at Clievemead, that we've saved up for!"

Joan brightened. Green trees and running water, after the hot, drab city!

"My Ted'll be there too. And Alf, to take us on the river. Ah, Alf's a fine chap! That's the sort you could do with. Lively, jolly, makin' good money at his uncle's shop, an' plays the concertina like an angel. Hear him sing 'It's the Seasoning what does it!' in the New Cut of a Saturday night! A man to be proud of—an' there ain't anything he wouldn't do for you, Joan. Come on, an' let's get ready for a good time."

Joan's face fell a little. The thought of Mr. Alf Blodmore did not seem to attract. She sat silent. Did she wish to leave town, after all? Once more she seemed to see the sunny ripple of hair over Mottisfont's ears, the masterful poise of his head, the firm lips that smiled so charmingly.

"Joan!" called Emmie shrilly from behind the curtain, "aren't you goin' to pack? Train leaves Waterloo in an hour!"

CHAPTER III

THE WORTH FROCK

If I were the ownly girl in the world
An' you were the ownly boy;
I would sy such wonderful things to you . . .!

THE strains of a squeaky concertina accompanied the song. The Honourable Hilda Detchmere shuddered. "The common, or river bounder," she said acidly, "is the most detestable of all animals. Look at those ghastly people in the skiff."

"Well, don't look at them, my dear Hilda," chuckled Philip Mottisfont, settling himself comfortably in his deck-chair. "Watch the sunset instead."

Save for the song, a golden peace brooded over the Thames. A group of serene and happy-looking people sat under the upper awnings of Lady Dunluce's house-boat *Lethe*—a leviathan of a house-boat, double-decked, perfectly appointed, and softly brilliant with flowers. It was moored to the bank near a grove of willows. The air was hot and still, the westering sun dipped behind purple hills, and filled the sky with glory. The river rolled calm and glassy in the after-glow.

The music came from a hired two-pair skiff that was wobbling ignobly down mid-stream, pulled with

splashing strokes by a loudly dressed young man. A red-haired girl lounged in the bows, voluptuously eating greengages and flipping the stones at the oarsman. On the after-thwart another Cockney youth, in a Leander blazer and a boating-straw with the Guards' colours, tortured the concertina and sang in a nasal sentimental voice to a maiden in pink, who sat in the stern-sheets looking unhappy.

"People like that," said a young man on the house-boat languidly, "want drowning."

Mottisfont sprang from his chair with a sharp exclamation.

Two of the people in the skiff had suddenly elected to change places. The man with the concertina helped the girl in pink to her feet. At that moment the oarsman caught a violent "crab" and fell backwards; the girl in pink was thrown off her balance by the lurch, and fell with a splash into the river. The whole thing happened in a moment.

The boat shot half-a-dozen yards ahead. The oarsman struggled frantically to get up, the red-haired girl screamed. The concertina player, with a face of terror, launched himself headlong to the rescue of the struggling girl, and soused into the water with a mighty splash. He came up, yards short of her, and began to flounder helplessly and to swallow large gulps of the river.

Mottisfont tore off his jacket in a twinkling.

"As old Horace has it:—'Strange monsters in the vasty deep!'" he exclaimed, and with a laugh vaulted over the rail and plunged in with a clean dive. He shot to the surface and swam out with a swinging

over-arm stroke—cool, swift, and efficient. In a few moments he had covered the fifty yards and reached the struggling girl. She felt a firm hand supporting her, and a calm, steady voice at her ear.

"Don't struggle! You're as safe as a house—I've got you. Just keep like that."

Philip, treading water as he supported the girl, turned to see if the other sufferer required him. But the boat had managed to reach the concertina player somehow, and its crew, seeing the girl was in safe hands, devoted themselves to the distressed musician. They were hauling him in like a sack; the red-headed girl, lamenting loudly, had her fingers twined in his hair.

"That's all right," chuckled Philip, and then to his charge. "Just lay your head back—I'll get you ashore. You're in no danger."

The dazed girl ceased struggling and gave herself up to Fate. Before she knew what had happened she was at the house-boat's gangway, and strong arms helped her out. She found herself, drenched and limp, with wisps of wet hair over her eyes, standing amid a group of well-dressed and frankly amused strangers. Philip Mottisfont, streaming like a soaked retriever, for the first time looked straight at her. He gave a startled exclamation.

"Why, it's Miss Ayre!"

Joan, for it was no other, raised her eyes to his with a faint gasp. She looked utterly lost.

"How good you have been!" she stammered. "I —I don't know what happened. Please, I must get back to the boat——"

"Out of the question!" said a pleasant, elderly lady with a commanding air. "You will stay here, my girl, till we find you some dry things. Douglas! Send those people away. The man can look after himself."

"Boat, there!" hailed the young man addressed as Douglas. "You can carry on. We'll look after your ah—friend! Pity they don't keep such riff-raff off the river," he added in a contemptuous undertone.

The crew of the skiff, who had hauled their dripping musician on board, hesitated, and then moved dismally away, Emmie Clegg—who was the red-haired girl—anxiously shouting something that did not reach the ears of Joan. And Joan herself was taken by the arm and led, protesting and still dazed, into the interior of the house-boat.

"The first thing you need," said Joan's guide, a remarkably pretty girl with mischievous grey-blue eyes, "is a hot bath. Here you are. I'll find some clothes for you. Not a word till you come out again. And don't thank me!"

Joan found herself pushed into a small but luxurious bathroom.

"Where in the world have I got to!" said Joan feebly, as the door closed behind her.

She stood for some moments dripping river water on to the snowy floor-gratings. It was as though she had dived through the amber depths of the Thames and emerged into another world. The most amazing thing of all was that Philip Mottisfont was her rescuer—the Fairy Prince who had brought her

among these marvels. Joan's wet cheeks coloured faintly, and her pulse beat quicker. Gone was the noisy crew of the skiff, the terrible admiration of Alf Blodmore and his concertina.

The soothing plash of hot water in the bath called her to herself.

Ten minutes later Joan, in a soft bath-wrap she found on the door, emerged into the passage. She was met by her laughing guide, Eileen Kinloch, who took her to a charming sleeping-cabin gay with flowers, where stood a smart lady's-maid.

"We are much of a size," said Eileen, "and I think my kit will fit you."

"How kind you are!" said Joan timidly, and then she saw the things laid out on the lace coverlet of the bed. Her eyes opened wide, and she gave a small gasp.

"Oh! I could not put on those!" she said, almost with awe.

"I'm afraid they're not very suitable," said Eileen apologetically, "but it's the only spare kit I've got here—you must make the best of it. Celeste," she said to the maid, "you will do everything possible for Miss—er—Miss Ayre. And take great pains with her hair."

"Very good m'lady," said the maid.

Lady Eileen Kinloch left the room, smiling with mischievous amusement. Joan, still uncertain what to do, stood where she was and sipped dazedly at some China tea in a Sèvres cup that was handed to her. Then the deft fingers of the maid began to busy themselves about her unresisting figure.

Joan felt as though she had strayed into some gorgeous dream of the *Arabian Nights.*

Philip Mottisfont, escaping from the chaff of his companions on deck, made for the men's bathroom, dried himself, and went to his room to dress. He also could hardly realize what had happened.

"Joan Ayre, of all girls living!" he said to himself. "Canted into the river like a sack of potatoes—and I've brought her here! Right into the midst of us all. Am I glad—or sorry? It ought to be a quick cure for me!"

He picked up a stud.

"She'll be a fish out of water here, in more senses than one. I hope the women will be decent to her. What wonderful eyes the girl has! They make a man's heart beat. They make him——"

He straightened himself suddenly.

"Philip, my son, don't make a fool of yourself," he said, and his mouth grew hard. "You've made one bad break already."

Outside his profession of the Bar, Philip was a deliberate and luxurious person. He spent some forty minutes on his toilet, a little reluctant, perhaps, to face the comments of his companions on deck. At last he joined them, cool, self-possessed, and debonair.

The twilight was closing down. Strings of little soft-coloured fairy lamps were lit along the rails and twined among the flowers, making a charming effect. Everyone was on deck but Eileen.

"Philip," said good-natured Lady Dunluce, "you

have charmed us all! A Sunday newspaper romance at our very doorstep!"

"Absolutely priceless!" exclaimed young Douglas Blair. "Just when we were all feeling so dull, old chap."

Hilda Detchmere turned her hard, handsome features and intolerant dark eyes on Mottisfont, with an air of proprietorship.

"Did you say you *know* this young person, Philip?" she asked in a commanding voice.

"I know her professionally," replied Philip easily, "she is the best typist in London—employed in Tallis Street."

"A typist office!" said Hilda grimly. "I should have imagined, from her behaviour and her companions, that it was a jam factory."

"I thought her rather a nice little thing—for her class," said Lady Dunluce amiably. "By the way, did any of you notice her hands?"

Hilda Detchmere stared.

"They were the hands," said Lady Dunluce, "of a gentlewoman." She turned, as a stranger came along the deck, and raised her lorgnette. "Whom have we here? Is it our dear Eileen at last?"

The company turned also, and a sudden silence fell on them—a silence of complete amazement. Philip stood up, feeling as though he had received an electric shock. He found himself facing the most beautiful woman he had ever seen in his life.

The vision that presented itself to him was slender, above the middle height, extraordinarily graceful and dignified. The oval face, the charm and

beauty of the features, were framed by a mass of bright brown hair, exquisitely arranged and waved. She looked the best-bred woman in the party. A glorious Worth frock, of expensive simplicity, did honour to its wearer. For a moment the company stared, dumbfounded.

It was Joan Ayre, the little typist of Temple Chambers.

CHAPTER IV

BORROWED PLUMES

JOAN, during that moment of general surprise, alone remained perfectly self-possessed. She advanced, and with a charming smile and the faintest possible flush, gave her hand to Mottisfont.

"I did not thank you properly for what you did for me," she said. "I felt so damp and stupid."

"I shall feel damp and stupid, too," said Philip, "if you thank me any more. I only conferred a benefit on everybody here by lifting you out of five feet of water. By the way, this is your hostess—Miss Ayre—Lady Dunluce."

"How kind you have been!" said Joan, taking that good-natured lady's hand. "I must not be a nuisance. As soon as my clothes are dry——"

"My dear," said Lady Dunluce, laying a hand on her shoulder, "you are not going to escape us like that. You have brought us Romance—I adore Romance! Put clothes out of your head—you will dine with us, of course. There's the gong—come along good people."

She turned and led the way in.

"How perfectly astounding!" she murmured to Douglas Blair, who was at her elbow. "A transformation!"

The invitation to dine was to Joan the culminating impossibility of this afternoon of wonders. There were no words for it. Yet she felt that to hesitate and make excuses would be underbred. All things seemed to follow so naturally here. A timid glow of happiness flushed through her heart. She glanced at Mottisfont; he was looking curiously happy too; the frankest respect and admiration was in his eyes. Lady Eileen Kinloch broke in with a little sigh.

"I never knew how well that Worth frock could look," she said. "I feel quite proud of it!"

Hilda Detchmere stared at Joan from under her half-closed eyelids.

"You carry clothes rather well," she said suavely. "I should advise you to give up typing, and adopt the profession of dressmaker's mannequin."

Joan gave no sign of having heard this impertinence, but walked unconcernedly in before Mottisfont, a slight tinge of pink mounting behind her ears. Philip, however, turned suddenly and came back.

"Hilda," he said quietly.

"Well!" said the Hon. Hilda Detchmere.

"You pride yourself, I believe, on a cutting tongue," he said, looking her straight in the eyes. "It may be an asset—to a barrister. It is a poisonous thing in a woman!"

He turned on his heel without another word. A dark, angry flush spread over Miss Detchmere's cheeks. Joan, quite unaware of the little interlude, found herself in a charming dining-cabin before a long table, shining with silver, snowy linen, banked with red roses and gladioli. Everyone was chattering

merrily, and a moment later Joan was seated between Philip and Douglas Blair. A silent man-servant in white-duck livery placed a little golden crescent of iced canteloupe melon before her.

"No need to ask you if you're any the worse for your ducking," said Lady Dunluce, nodding cheerfully to Joan. "You are the most decorative thing in the room. Tell me, did your past life all flash before you when you were under water, as one hears it does?"

"My past life has been very ordinary," smiled Joan, "until today."

"It's something to be rescued by a future Lord Chancellor!" laughed Eileen Kinloch.

"Are you a future Lord Chancellor?" said Joan to Mottisfont, opening her eyes.

"Pulling my leg is the only occupation this company has," said Mottisfont placidly.

"Nothing less than the Woolsack and a peerage will satisfy Philip," said Lady Dunluce. "Yes, I think we shall see him there. I hope so. I take an interest in the careers of unscrupulous young men; that is, when they are good-looking. You're not bad looking, Philip."

"He isn't really unscrupulous, either," said Lady Eileen with a twinkle, "only selfish. Aren't you, Philip?"

"Ambitious, anyhow," said Douglas with a slight wink.

"It's the same thing," said Eileen oracularly.

"Quaint nonsense these people talk, don't they?" said Mottisfont confidentially to Joan. "Tell me, are

you going on the river tomorrow? Some of the most lovely places in the Thames Valley are near us here."

During the rest of dinner he talked almost exclusively to Joan, and talked, too, with a charm that made her feel as if she were in an enchanted world. More and more did Joan become conscious that this man, of whom she had seen so little, was becoming an influence in her life that made her tremble. Never before had love entered into her drab existence. And he seemed like a being from another world. Now, for the hour at least, she was of that world. Philip seemed unconscious that she had ever been anything else. He talked to her as if he had known her for a year. Under the mask of his easy manners, she did not guess how deeply he, too, was moved.

The dinner ended, they all went out on deck, and Mottisfont was skilfully drawn aside by Hilda Detchmere, whose previous ill-temper quickly melted. Few women could remain out of humour long before Philip Mottisfont's quiet charm. Joan was engaged in talk by the rest of the group, and she introduced a topic which the others had all avoided.

"I hope my friends got back safely," she said a little uneasily. "Even now I hardly know what really happened. Only two of us fell in, but——"

"Well," said Douglas Blair, "as far as I could see, you were the only one that fell in. The gentleman in the—er—blazer, flopped in by way of an effort to save you. Rather a futile effort," added Blair drily, "as he evidently could not swim."

Joan stared blankly. Then she flushed and rose to her feet.

"To save me! And he could not swim?" she exclaimed warmly. "It is as brave a thing as I ever heard of!"

"Why, yes, in a way I suppose," said Blair, "but really——"

"I must go back and see them!" said Joan, moving away. "I—I ought not to be here——"

"No, no. Sit down Miss Ayre, and rest yourself," said Lady Dunluce soothingly. "Your friend has had nothing worse than a wetting, and is safe at home by now."

Joan hesitated. A silence had fallen on the others at the mention of the ineffable boating party. At that moment Mottisfont returned.

"Come on the upper deck, Miss Ayre," he said, "and I'll show you the most perfect sight in the Thames Valley—the moon rising over Knayth."

He detached her from the party with perfect naturalness and ease. Joan accompanied him, a little wonderingly, to the upper deck. A light laugh from Hilda Detchmere seemed to follow them. Philip, quite unconcerned, set a deck-chair for Joan, and dropped into another beside her. The river swirled gently, silvered by the first shimmer of moonlight. Bats were hawking through the still air, that was heavy with the scent of roses. From the rushes came the drowsy cry of a moorhen.

"Is not this perfect?" said Philip quietly, drinking in the scene with sombre eyes. "The fools that men are to strive for the things that do not matter, when there is so much beauty in the world."

Joan became aware that he was looking at her

intently. A thrill of happiness ran through her, at the magic of his presence at her side, the poise of his well-shaped head, the sense of power in the clean-cut features and strong chin.

"These things would never content you," she said. "I remember what they said below. You are ambitious."

Mottisfont laughed lightly.

"Yes," he said, "you are right. I am out for the big things—the big, stirring things of life. Success. I may not win it. But nothing under the sun would pay me for the loss of it."

"You would let nothing stand in your way?" said Joan. "You would tread under foot any weakness of your own that you thought might hamper you?"

"Ruthlessly," he answered, "and at any cost in pain to myself. Do you think that sounds hard? But a man is entitled to fight for the goal to which he has set himself, and to develop the best he believes is in him."

An unreasoning stab of pain shot through Joan's gentle little breast. In silence she looked away from him, and her eyes rested on a wonderful picture in the distance—the half-moon rising over a group of towers and gables standing above bosomed woods, on the crest of a hill across the river.

"How perfectly lovely," said Joan, anxious to change the theme. "What place is that?"

"That is Knayth Abbey," answered Philip, "one of the most beautiful houses in England. It belongs to an ancient race—the Tallbois family—or did

rather, for the last of them is dead. Every room and tower is full of history and charm, and the memory of great things. One wonders what will happen to it now."

"You know it?"

"I have been there once or twice, in old Lord Tallbois' time."

"I wish I could see it," murmured Joan, "but of course——"

"Anybody can see it for a shilling. It was thrown open to the public on Mondays when the family was away—and is now. The fees go to charity. Would you really care to go over it?" he said eagerly. "I am sure I could take you. Say on Tuesday, when it is clear of the rabble."

"I am engaged with my friends tomorrow," said Joan, "and on Tuesday—I shall be back at Puttock & Copes."

There was silence. A chill seemed to fall between them. A fraction of a second's pause, and Joan rose abruptly from the deck chair.

"I must go back!" she said in a stifled voice. "My friends will be wondering what has become of me."

Philip tried to detain her, but Joan made her way to the party of guests and declared that she must leave. She would change into her own clothes.

"It's impossible; your things are still soaking," said Eileen Kinloch. "Go just as you are—I don't need the frock. You can post it back to me; here is my address."

Joan thanked her, and bade a grateful adieu to

Lady Dunluce and the others. No further attempt was made to keep her. She had amused them all, but though perfectly courteous they had the air of having had enough of her now. Her hour was over. Mottisfont was the only one who regretted her departure.

"If you really will go, I shall see you to your quarters," he said.

Joan replied that it was only half a mile, and no escort was necessary. But Philip insisted, and soon they had landed and were walking side by side along the dusty white road in the moonlight. There was complete silence between them. Joan set the pace rapidly, though Philip seemed inclined to linger. He looked surprised, and even hurt; he seemed to be keeping himself under strong restraint. A house came in view and Joan halted.

"Don't come any farther, please," she said. "I am at home now." She held out her hand, and Philip took it.

"Thank you, for your kindness to me," she said in a low voice. "Good-bye, Mr. Mottisfont."

"You will let me see you again?" he said, without releasing her hand.

Joan looked straight at him.

"Only," she said, "when you have work for me to do at Puttock & Copes. Good-bye."

She withdrew her hand, and turning abruptly, walked straight on. In a few moments she was out of sight round the corner. A straggling, tumble-down farm-house loomed up before her. It was inhabited by a married uncle of Emmie's, who

managed a small market garden, and here the boating party was staying as paying week-end guests.

Joan passed through the wicket-gate and opened the kitchen door. A smoky lamp stood on the table, also a beer-jug and glasses. Emmie was sitting on Ted Hartopp's knee, and Alf Blodmore was crooning a lullaby to the concertina.

A thunderbolt could not have made a greater sensation than the splendid vision that confronted them in the Worth frock. The lamplight shone with a lambent glory on Joan's hair. Alf Blodmore dropped his concertina and gaped, open-mouthed. Emmie gave a little scream.

"Joan!" she gasped after a brief pause, "is this you?"

"Of course it's I," said Joan. "They lent me some clothes." She went straight up to Mr. Blodmore and took both his unresisting hands in hers. "I want to thank you, Alf, for what you did for me," she said warmly. "It was brave and splendid of you!"

Alf wagged her hands up and down mechanically.

"That's all right, Miss Ayre," he gasped. "It—it wasn't anything. Nothin' at all, Miss Ayre. I'm proud——"

He dropped her hands as if they burned him, and moved back a step, staring at her with awe and incredulity. Ted Hartopp's eyes were like saucers. Joan stepped across and affectionately kissed the astonished Emmie.

"I'm going to bed, dear," she said. "I'm rather tired. Good night, Emmie."

She took a candle from the slab. Emmie gave her a quick, suspicious glance, but Joan wearily climbed the stairs, feeling as though her limbs had turned to lead. On the landing she heard a step behind her.

"Miss Ayre!"

She turned, and found Alf Blodmore had followed her. For a long time she had endured patiently this man's trying but always respectful admiration. To hurt even Alf Blodmore's feelings was a thing impossible to her—foreign to her very nature. And now he seemed transfigured; a great light in his honest brown eyes redeemed the heavy chin and commonplace features of the man.

"Miss Ayre!" he said hoarsely. "I gotter speak—I can't help it! I've always hoped—you might get to care a bit about me? Did you mean what you said just now? I know I ain't much of a chap!"

He fell on his knees, and caught her hands.

"Ain't there no chance for me, Joan? When I see you in the clothes them toffs give you, I thought you was out of my reach—for good an' all. You look so far above me—you was always that! I'd lay me life down for you!" he said wildly. "Tell me, Joan, ain't there no hope for me—not even a little?"

Joan, a great lump in her throat, tried to draw her hand away.

"Don't!" she said faintly. "I'm so sorry—so sorry."

Alf looked up at her. One glance told him it was hopeless. He rose to his feet, and hung his head.

"All right, Miss Ayre," he said huskily. "Gawd bless you—an' guard you!"

Joan escaped to her room, her eyes wet. For some time she stood motionless by the window. She was infinitely sorry for Alf. He had never been anything more than a nuisance, which her gentle little soul shrank from repelling harshly. Poor Alf! It was hard on him. Why should he care for her? And in a few minutes he was blotted from her mind.

Joan looked round her at the meanly furnished room, with its broken wash-stand and hideous wall-paper. Her heart grew heavier. She was used to poverty; never before had these things affected her. The shabby curtains threw a dancing shadow on the wall, the cracked mirror seemed to stare at her mockingly. Slowly she began to unhook the Worth frock and laid it on the bed. It was such a dress as she had seen in dreams. In its place she donned a cheap print wrap.

The scene on the house-boat came back to her. Philip Mottisfont's clear-cut features against the glow of the fairy lamps; his gentle deference, the arresting charm of his voice. Seating herself at the window, Joan looked out upon the night.

"No man with eyes like that is selfish," she murmured. "I will not have them call him selfish!" There was a strangled feeling in her throat. "I love him! I love him! Let me be honest with myself, at least. And if he were poor—I believe—I believe that he might care. What is the use? He belongs to another world than mine.

"He will marry some woman of his own class—one

who can help, not hinder him. What am I? A waif, a nobody—and poor. It is my poverty that stands between us. If only I had never met him!"

Joan flung her arms across the table, and buried her face on them. Her shoulders quivered. A tear trickled over the print wrapper.

CHAPTER V

THE CODE TELEGRAM

THE towers of Knayth Abbey flung blue shadows athwart the shaven lawns. Four great cedar trees beyond the terrace stood like sentinels of immemorial peace. A stately peacock trailed his gorgeous fan slowly over the dewy grass. Above him a hundred windows flamed in the morning sunshine.

In the panelled south-east room which opened on the terrace, Mr. Pond, the butler, watched his subordinate footman deftly polishing decanters.

"You certainly know how to handle glass, James," said Mr. Pond patronizingly, but not unkindly. "I don't mind telling you, my lad, that you do pretty well."

"I've served some very particular gentlemen, Mr. Pond," said James Floyd deferentially, "but I've never had the luck to drop in such a good place as this. And I'm extry pleased to give satisfaction to you, Mr. Pond, who is, as I may say, at the top of the profession."

"As to the place," replied the butler, "I don't know how long you or any of us'll keep it. I'm a bit surprised at the steward takin' you on, though we're very short-handed, even with nobody in residence. It beats me to guess what's to become of Knayth, now there ain't a Tallbois left, and his lordship don't

even seem to have left a will. It's a great pity," he sighed. "I don't see myself comin' down to servin' a soap-boiler or a war-millionaire. I've always been used to live with gentlepeople."

The deep clang of the front entrance bell interrupted him, and he frowned majestically.

"That," said Mr. Pond sourly, "will be some of those dratted Monday excursionists, wantin' to go over the place. And there's several things I want to do." He looked sharply at the footman. "Do you think, James, that you're equal to showin' them round? You're an intelligent man, an' I've coached you well about the pictures and the Knayth history and all the rest of it—it bein' my idea that you might relieve me of this job, which I'm fed up with."

"I'm sure I could, Mr. Pond, and very happy I shall be to oblige you," said Floyd. "I've learned so much from you that I feel as if I know enough about the Abbey an' the Tallbois history to fill a book. I can handle those excursionists."

"Cut along then, my lad," said Mr. Pond. "See that they wipes their boots properly, pay in their shillings, an' sign the address book; that's the rule. And," added Mr. Pond, as Floyd departed, "don't forget the Knayth Goblet and its story. They're all after that, an' likely you'll get a tip out of it."

The footman left the room wearing an expression of gratified wonder at Mr. Pond's condescension. Once outside the room, however, he permitted himself to smile. For James Floyd was no other than Slaney, the trusted henchman of Callaghan and his enterprising gang.

For a fortnight Slaney had been installed at Knayth Abbey, and by his diligence, grave manner, and deferential politeness to the butler and housekeeper had become a favourite in the upper-servants' hall. From Mr. Pond he had acquired a wealth of information about the Tallbois households, both town and country.

The berth was beginning to pall on him a little, for it seemed that he might wait an indefinite time before learning anything about the lost daughter of the late Jim Carey, and he was out of touch with his partners.

Slaney crossed the great central hall that was large enough to hold a double company of infantry, and opened one of the main doors. On the top of the wide flight of steps stood a girl in a cheap linen frock, a wistful expression on her face.

"May I look over the house, please?" she asked timidly.

For a moment Slaney stood with his fingers on the door handle, staring at her. The manner of the trained man-servant seemed to have fallen away from him. As he scanned the girl's face his eyes showed amazement, greed, wonder, and doubt. So strange was his look that Joan—for it was she—felt a curious little shiver. Then the mask fell upon Slaney's face.

"Yes, miss," he said a trifle huskily. "Come in, please."

Joan entered the great hall. At that moment a tall grey-haired man in blue serge came down the oak staircase. It was Mr. Deane, the resident agent of the Knayth estate. He glanced at Joan. Mr. Deane, though elderly, had an eye for beauty. The

tender, simple charm of the girl's face interested him.

"You wish to see over the place?" he said courteously.

"If I may?" replied Joan. Mr. Deane hesitated.

"You may go to your duties," he said to Slaney. "As Pond is not here I will show this lady around."

Slaney withdrew slowly and reluctantly. When he was out of the hall he shook his head.

"Can't be," he muttered. "An' yet—I ain't sure. It wants watchin'."

Mr. Deane led Joan to a side table on which stood a book.

"Your name and address here, please," he said, with a smile, "and just a shilling in this little box. Thank you. It goes to a worthy charity. And now I'll do what I can for you. This is the great entrance hall, and was once the banqueting chamber of Knayth."

Joan feasted her eyes on the glories of the vast chamber, the suits of armour,the galleried staircases, the mellow light shining through diamond-paned windows on to pictures that were beyond price.

"It is more beautiful than I ever dreamed of!" she said.

Mr. Deane told her the history of the more striking objects in the hall. Joan scarcely heard him. Curiously, she felt no awe at the proportions and splendour of the place. A feeling of perfect contentment and peace and happiness seemed to take possession of her.

"But the East Room is finer than this," said Mr.

Deane. "It is the gem of Knayth. Presently you shall see it."

"I should love to see it," returned Joan gratefully "Is this it?"

She opened the door nearest to her, one of six that gave upon the hall, before Mr. Deane could perform the office. He looked surprised, and a trifle annoyed.

"Ah, you have seen the house before," he said.

"Never in my life," replied Joan, and as if recollecting herself, she added with slight confusion, "I beg your pardon. I should have waited for you. Is this not the room?"

"It is the room," said Mr. Deane smiling, "but I do not see how you could know it if you have not been here."

"I was never even in Berkshire before," said Joan, "but I feel as though I had seen this place in a dream, and that it had come true. Do you believe in such things?" she added, laughing.

"Knayth itself is a dream—a dream of beauty," said Mr. Deane, throwing the door wide. The sunshine lit the panelled oak of a superb chamber, with a fireplace in which a man could stand upright. Before the empty hearth lay two great deerhounds, motionless, their heads resting on their outstretched paws.

"Don't be afraid of the dogs," said Mr. Deane. "They will take no notice of you—they never do of any one. That breed has been at Knayth three centuries. Sometimes," he added smiling, "I think they are mourning for poor Lord Tallbois, though he was bedridden, and it is long since they saw him."

"They do look sad," said Joan. "And what beauties they are!"

As though to give Mr. Deane the lie, at the first sound of Joan's voice the nearest hound raised his head and looked straight at her. The second followed suit. The two great dogs rose and walked up to Joan, their brown, liquid eyes raised to hers. One of them gently thrust its cool nose into her hand.

"Oh, what darlings!" exclaimed Joan, dropping on one knee and caressing them. The larger hound raised a grizzled fore-leg and pawed her gently, and its mate tried to lick her chin. Mr. Deane stared.

"You must have a wonderful way with dogs!" he said. "I'm fond of them, too, but though I've served the estate forty years these treat me as though I did not exist. Come and see this portrait—it is a Lely. Is not that a beautiful face? Viscountess Tallbois of Charles II.'s Court; for this title is one of the few that descends in the female line if there are no sons. The oak secretaire on which she is leaning is the very one you see here in the room, and that is a Knayth deerhound that lies at her feet in the picture."

Joan admired the beautiful woman in the Stuart dress, but Mr. Deane swept on in the tide of his tale.

"And here is the most priceless thing we have," he said, pointing to a shimmering object of glass and gems that stood in a hollowed recess of the wall, protected by a glazed door with a grille of thin steel bars. "The Knayth Goblet. It has a secret of its own, and it was made by Benvenuto Cellini, the greatest artist —and the greatest villain—of the Renaissance.

There are thirteen pierced jewels on the stem of it alone."

Joan, with a little exclamation of wonder at its beauty, gazed at the goblet. She rested her arm unconsciously on the black oak secretaire before her and the sun lit up her hair. One of the deerhounds stretched himself contentedly at her feet.

Mr. Deane gave a faint gasp. Joan's features, her pose, her very surroundings, were a perfect replica of the stately Viscountess on the mellow canvas above her head, standing by the crouching hound. Save only for the difference between the cheap linen frock and the Court dress, the resemblance was perfect—uncanny. Joan turned her head.

"What is the matter?" she said quietly.

"Nothing!" said Deane confusedly. "A—a curious resemblance, that's all. I——"

"You were telling me about the Goblet. It is exquisite. I wish I could see it close at hand," said Joan, almost with a touch of command.

Without a word Mr. Deane took a bunch of keys from his pocket and opened the glazed door. He seemed curiously anxious to please Joan.

"It is a long time since it was brought out," he said, setting the Goblet on a table just out of Joan's reach, with reverent care. The amber-coloured cup was double-rimmed, and the stem was set with sapphires and moonstones.

"What is its secret?"

"A harmless one—for Cellini. It is impossible to drink from it without spilling half the contents at least. I will show you."

There was a water jug close at hand, but Mr. Deane brought a decanter of Maderia from a cellaret, remarking that to use water would be sacrilege. He poured in a wineglassful, and taking the Goblet up carefully, tilted it as though to drink. Immediately a stream of wine flowed through his fingers along the stem, and out by the double rim, pattering on the oak table.

"It is useless as a drinking-cup then!" said Joan, laughing at him.

"No," said Mr. Deane, "not if the trick is known. There is some method, very cunningly devised, of touching those pierced jewels. But none save the Tallbois—and generally only the head of the family —holds that secret. I have seen the old Viscount do it. And it amused him to let others try; none have ever succeeded. I've known a crowned head attempt it, and fail."

Joan took her arm from the secretaire and stood erect. At that moment, it seemed to her that she saw a face peering at her round the ivy that fringed the near window. A face so sinister and eager that a shock of revulsion seized the girl, and a faint trembling. The face vanished—surely it was nothing but a vision!

She went deadly white none the less, and swayed where she stood. Mr. Deane, alarmed, sprang to support her.

"It is nothing!" she said dizzily, and remembered that she had had no breakfast. "I fell in the river yesterday; perhaps it's that—a little faint——"

"You look ill!" exclaimed Mr. Deane, decidedly

scared. "Some wine!—" He seized the decanter and looked round; he splashed some wine into the Goblet and gripped the stem. "Take this—never mind your dress—it will pull you round."

Joan put the glass aside and freed herself from Mr. Deane's supporting arm. He set down the Goblet and looked at her anxiously. Again the buzzing in her ears, the dizziness. To faint there would be dreadful. She stretched out a hand, took the Goblet, drank, and set it back on the table. At once she felt revived.

"Thank you, that is better," she said, and then glanced with surprise at Mr. Deane. He was staring in blind amazement.

"Do you know," he said slowly, "that you drained the Knayth Goblet and never spilled a drop!"

"Did I?" said Joan, opening her eyes. "A lucky accident—for my dress. But how strange."

"Strange! You could not do it again in a thousand times!" he said, staring, and caught up the decanter. "Try. Oblige me by trying. It looked like a miracle!"

"No more wine, please!" protested Joan.

He dashed water into the Goblet. Joan stretched out a hand. With perfect unconsciousness her slender fingers clicked down on four of the thirteen pierced jewels of the stem; she raised the cup, drained it cleanly, and set it down with a steady hand. Mr. Deane came nearer to her.

"Who are you?" he said a little hoarsely. "Young lady, where do you come from?"

Slaney, slinking back from his post of vantage behind the ivy of the window, hurried round the wing of the house and made for the hall. His eyes were shining with the light of triumph. He made for the book in the porch, and swiftly scribbled Joan's name and address on an envelope. Then, hurrying to the garage, he wheeled out a bicycle and pedalled rapidly down the long drive through the park.

Slaney reached the highroad, wheeled to the left, and after five minutes' hard riding came within view of the hamlet of High Cleave. Rounding a corner somewhat recklessly he nearly ran down a tall, shabby individual tramping along the dusty road. Slaney swerved, and without apology rode straight on.

The shabby man halted abruptly and stared after the cyclist. He stared with extraordinary intentness, making no protest but following the rider with his eyes. Slaney, quite unconscious of any such scrutiny, covered the remaining quarter-mile, and leaned his bicycle against the post-office, which was the first outlying house of the hamlet. He entered and took a telegraph form. A little out of breath, Slaney spent some appreciable time and thought in concocting his message, which he handed to the girl operator. She looked at it with surprise.

"What d'you call this?" she asked pertly.

"It's all right, miss. Send it just as it is," he said, and paying the fee demanded, went out. He cycled back to Knayth, but saw nothing of the man he had passed on the way out, and who, doubtless, was already through the village. Slaney took no interest

in him. His own heart was bursting with the joy of a great achievement.

"The best day's work ever done for Callaghan!" said Slaney with a chuckle.

It was some ten minutes later when the tall stranger emerged from under the hedge and again tramped forward along the dusty road at the same even, unhurrying pace. Though elderly, with a fringe of grey hair over his temples, he held himself erect, with a soldierly carriage. Despite a shabby attire, he had the look of one accustomed to command; his features were distinguished, the mouth slightly cruel, a grey, pointed beard grew on his chin. His eyes were of a faded blue, looking straight ahead of him with a sheathed, brooding stare.

He turned into the post-office, and in a pleasant voice asked the girl for two penny stamps.

"Not much business to trouble you here?" he said, smiling as he took them.

"Very little indeed, sir," she said, adding the "sir" unconsciously, in spite of his seedy clothes. "Though I've had a job just now," she added tartly, "that's more like a Chinese puzzle than anything—" the girl checked herself, as if remembering her official position. "Anything else you want?"

"I should like," said the stranger, with a glance round that took in every detail of the shop, "a packet of 'Union Jack' tobacco. I think I see some on the top shelf there."

The girl had to get a chair in order to reach it. While her back was turned the stranger, with remark-

able deftness, slipped his long brown hand under the wire post-office screen and abstracted a telegram from the top of the file. It was out of sight long before the girl descended. He paid for the tobacco, thanked her politely, and went out.

A little way out of the hamlet the tall stranger seated himself against a fence and smoothed out the telegram form. It certainly read a little peculiarly for a village post-office.

MISLED, LONDON.

ZSIP ILXO 7 BQXX X MIVEOWF QC WFO WIMMESQS FOQXOQOCC.

5.

The stranger's brows contracted, but a grim smile twisted his mouth. Using a stub of pencil he began slowly, and with evidently an effort of memory, to jot down fresh letters underneath the apparently meaningless forms given above.

Towards the end of the task the pallor of his face heightened, a deadly, threatening light crept into his eyes, and his teeth shut together with a sharp click.

MISLED, LONDON.

JOAN AYRE, 7 FIRR ROAD, LAMBETH, IS THE TALLBOIS HEIRESS.

CHAPTER VI

IN THE NAME OF CHARITY

JOAN'S slim figure retreated down the long park drive of Knayth, between the bordering oaks.

She was returning to the work-a-day world after an hour of wonders; her head was confused with the beauty and the charm that had been revealed to her. Running through it like a silver thread was a sense of subdued laughter. She wondered if the old Tallbois had turned in their graves—and particularly Cellini, that supreme artist and supreme scoundrel of bygone Italy, at the thought that his most cunning secret had been solved by an obscure little waif of modern London. Did he look up at her, perhaps, from the smoking underworld of Dante's hell, a curse in his eyes? For a curse, too, haunted Joan—the gilded curse of imagination.

Near the park gates she turned for a lingering farewell look at the stately pile of Knayth, towering above the trees. She was reluctant to leave it. And there was another, near by, who seemed to find it as fascinating as she.

In the roadway, leaning upon the fence, was a shabby man with a neat, pointed beard. His chin rested on his hands, and his eyes—remarkable eyes, with the same unmoved stare in them that is seen in

the eyes of a falcon, were fixed on the distant towers and windows of Knayth, as though they held him with some hidden spell. His face was drawn and bloodless.

But as Joan approached the gates, he turned his gaze upon her and held it there as though Knayth were suddenly forgotten. He remained motionless, but his fierce eyes dwelt on her face with an expression so strange and intense that it was as though, with an effort of will, he were beseeching the girl to turn and look at him. And Joan turned her head.

She saw nothing more than a tramp leaning upon a fence. He was under the shadow of a dark cedar tree that overhung the road. She was barely conscious of his presence, and still deep in thought Joan passed through the gates and down the slope of the dusty road.

At the bend, half-way down the hillside, Joan paused at a field-gate. Cows were cropping contentedly among the buttercups. Through the plains below, shimmering in the mid-day heat, the river wound like a silver snake. In the distance, a moving feather of white steam marked a train that was hurrying Londonwards. Joan's thoughts went back to the moving incidents of the past forty-eight hours, and gave a little sigh.

"I must wake up," she said aloud, "or I shall think that I am living in dreamland."

She turned, and with a slight start saw that she was not alone. The tall tramp who had stood by the gates of Knayth was approaching her. Walking slowly, holding himself very erect, he came straight up to Joan and halted within six feet of her.

The place was lonely. Joan's heart gave a strange flutter of anxiety. The man did not speak.

"What do you want?" she forced herself to say.

The tramp took off his hat, showing a head of short grizzled hair.

"Could you," he said, in a gentle, rather strained, voice, "could you spare—a trifle, even the smallest coin, for a man who has walked far, and is—very down on his luck?"

His voice hesitated, and seemed to tremble a little. Joan guessed that he was not used to begging; it came hard to him. She took out her worn little purse. It contained one note, a half-crown, and a penny. She could not offer him the penny. But the half-crown was a serious matter to Joan. She took it out, none the less.

"No! no!" said the man hastily, raising his hand in protest. "Neither of us, surely, is rich—I must not deprive you of so much. Give me any little coin —no matter how trifling."

A beggar who complained of the largeness of his dole was, to Joan, a thing incredible. Yet, somehow, she did not feel any surprise. She discovered an unsuspected sixpence in the lining of the purse, and gave him that. He accepted it with a grave bow and a murmur of gratitude.

"A lucky sixpence, I hope," said Joan, smiling at him.

"Lucky, it may be, for both of us," he replied.

Joan became aware that he was looking down at her, from the height of his six feet, with the strangest intentness. His pale blue eyes seemed to devour her

face; he did not move, yet appeared to be keeping a strict restraint on himself. The long, slim hand that clutched the sixpence, shook very faintly. And Joan herself was aware of a slight, undefined trembling. She was not afraid. In ordinary circumstances, such a meeting with a powerful tramp in a lonely spot would have frightened her badly. Yet she felt no fear at all, and for some moments they looked at each other in silence. The tramp spoke first.

"You look at me," he said slowly, "as though you thought you knew me."

Joan shook her head.

"You remind me," she said, "just a little, of some one I knew when I was quite a small girl."

A vague remembrance flitted through Joan's mind, across the years, of one whom she had known as "Uncle Jim," in childhood.

"A fortunate man," said the tramp, "wherever he be, to have remained in the memory of so charming a little lady."

"He is dead," replied Joan quietly. "Long ago."

The tramp inclined his head.

"Death," he said, "must come to us all. Believe one who knows—there are many worse things than death."

Suddenly he came a step nearer to her. And still Joan, her heart beating strangely, did not move. It was then that a raucous shout burst upon the silence.

"Joan—Joan! Hulloa—hulloa—Joan!"

Round the corner of the lane came Emmie, Ted Hartopp, and Alf, riotous and merry. Alf, with

wheat-ears and poppies in his hat-band, swinging his concertina.

The shabby stranger stepped back. He raised his hat to Joan with a deep, courteous bow.

"Madam," he said, "in the name of Charity—I thank you."

He turned, and strode past the three new-comers as if they did not exist; in a few moments he was out of sight, round the bend. Joan's friends swarmed up to her.

"Why, Joan! What was old Weary Willie jawing about?" said Mr. Ted Hartopp.

"Did he interfere with you, Miss Joan?" exclaimed Alf eagerly. "If so, I'll go an' dot him one!"

"No, no!" replied Joan quickly. "Nothing of the kind."

"I should say it's just as well we turned up," said Emmie; "that dirty old tramp——"

For some reason Joan felt a sudden annoyance.

"He was not dirty!" she said crisply. "I feel sure he was no ordinary tramp. I felt very sorry for him. There was good in that man. I liked his face."

"Liked it!" exclaimed Emmie. "You're crazy, Joan! He's got villain written all over him. I wouldn't like to meet that man on a dark night! As for the face, I saw it when he was passin' us. It was the face of a devil!"

Joan laughed, and making no answer, drew her arm through Emmie's; the four of them strolled down the hill together.

"We've had a jolly time, us three," said Emmie. "What have you been doin', Joan? You said you were going to stay in the house."

"My headache got better," said Joan. "I wandered out by myself and thought I would like to see Knayth Abbey. On Mondays, they let you in for a shilling. I went all over it, and never saw anything more lovely in my life."

Emmie's snub nose wrinkled up in contempt.

"If that's your idea of a frolic, dear, you're welcome," she said.

"That big place on the hill," put in Alf, "belonged to some heavy swells, didn't it? I heard they'd all died out, though."

"No loss, either," replied Emmie, her face darkening. "If all the heavy swells in the country did the same I shouldn't miss 'em."

"Sayings of Emmie the Anarchist, Number One!" said Mr. Hartopp facetiously. "Well, I s'pose we'd better have dinner an' pack up. It's little old London for us, worse luck, by the five train."

They returned to the little farm-house, and after the mid-day meal, the girls put their few belongings together. Joan obtained a large cardboard box, and packing the Worth frock with great care, addressed it to Lady Eileen Kinloch, Grosvenor Square. She saw it go with a pang of regret. Never again would she wear so wonderful a dress.

The journey to London was a little constrained; Alf Blodmore was silent, grave, and shy. Joan did her best to treat the incident of the night before as though it had not happened. She was very, very sorry for him, though she could not believe that any one could be seriously unhappy about her. The two young men insisted on providing supper at a little

restaurant in Battersea, and afterwards escorted the girls to their home, bidding them farewell at the door. Ted embraced Emmie affectionately and openly. Alf Blodmore took Joan's hand in his large paw.

"I'm sorry I worried you, Miss Joan," he said huskily. "You'll remember, if ever you want a friend, there ain't nothing I wouldn't do for you, all the same."

"Thank you, Alf," said Joan gently. The girls went upstairs and prepared to retire. Joan donned a dressing-gown, and sat down for some time before the open window, musing.

"What are you looking at?" said Emmie, joining her presently. A dim, tall figure, no more than a shadow in the gloom, was just visible far below on the opposite pavement. "Who's that down there?"

"I don't know," said Joan absently. The vague shadow reminded her, somehow, of one whom she had seen before that day, and called up vagrant thoughts.

"Come to bed," said Emmie, drawing her away from the window. "You'll catch cold, dear."

Down in the street, the man stood in the shadow who was looking up at the little top-floor window with watchful, longing eyes. It was the tall tramp who had met Joan below the gates of Knayth. For a long time he remained there, even after the light was extinguished, and the window was in darkness. It was as though he could not force himself to leave.

The heavy footfall of a patrolling constable made itself heard. The shabby stranger glanced over his shoulder and, moving silently away, vanished down a side-street.

CHAPTER VII

THE INCREDIBLE TIDINGS

THE pallid London sunlight was streaming in through the window as Joan and Emmie sat breakfasting at a rickety table next morning. A frowsy, but amiable charwoman opened the door, and with a nod of greeting tossed a letter to the girls. The long blue envelope had arrived by the first post, and was addressed to Joan.

She opened it, and at once the herrings and tea were forgotten. Joan gazed at the missive with bewildered eyes.

"Love-letter, dear?" enquired Emmie ironically.

"What in the world does this mean?" said Joan, handing her the letter. "It's some mistake!"

155 Bedford Row, W. C.

MISS JOAN AYRE.

DEAR MADAM,—I have to request that you will favour me by fixing an appointment, as early as possible, at this office. Information awaits you which I think you will find greatly to your advantage.

I am, Madam,
Yours faithfully,
THEOPHILUS BELL
(*Solicitor*).

Emmie stared at the letter blankly.

"It's a sell, if you ask me," she said. "Why don't he say what he means? Think you'd better go, Joan?"

"Go! Of course I shall go!" said Joan, whose curiosity was intensely aroused. "Though I'm certain it's only a blunder."

"I hope it's nothing worse," rejoined Emmie pessimistically. "You be mighty careful, Joan! I've heard of funny things happening to girls over letters like this. Not but what the address is respectable," she added. "Bedford Row—that's where the lawyers live. Commissioner for oaths, too! Ted could teach him a bit there! I've had to speak to Ted about that. Yes, you'd better go. Maybe somebody's left you fifty pounds!" pursued Emmie, growing excited. "What luck if it is! Think any of your people have hopped the twig, dear?"

"I haven't a relative in the world," protested Joan. "There's nobody who could leave me anything. It's nonsense!"

"Maybe it's some rich old lady whose pug dog you once saved from bein' run over," said Emmie sarcastically. "I've read about such things. Theophilus Bell! Sounds like a parson, don't it? Why not ring him up at the office an' save writing? Then we'll both go together."

Joan caught at the idea eagerly, and the girls started for the City. They discussed the letter on the way. By this time, Joan had got it firmly fixed in her mind that the lawyer had fifty pounds for her—it could not be more—and she was as happy as a child.

"What a holiday we'll have, Emmie, if it's true!" she said, her eyes sparkling. "A new frock for both of us, and a fortnight by the sea!" Emmie was still sceptical. They reached the office early. Joan looked up Mr. Bell's number in the telephone book, and rang the Exchange. The reply came from Bedford Row—Joan said she would be free after 6 P.M., and could Mr. Bell see her then? After a pause the answer grated in Joan's ear: Mr. Bell would be happy to fix the appointment for six-thirty. Business would be discussed when she arrived. It was settled between the girls that they should go together.

The day's typing work dragged like lead, and Joan could hardly attend to her typing. In the afternoon ill-luck overtook them; a press of work arrived, and Miss Puttock required Emmie, whose turn it was, to stay overtime. To refuse was impossible, nor could Joan put off her appointment; there was nothing for it but to go alone. Joan set off for Bedford Row on foot and on the stroke of half-past six she was mounting the stairs of one of the old Georgian houses in that secluded street. Mr. Bell's name was painted, among others, on a panel in the hall, and appeared again on a well-worn brass plate at the door of his office on the second floor.

Joan paused at the door. There was a curious stirring at her heart; she felt as though her foot was on the threshold of Fate. A little thrill of fear, a desire to run out of the house and leave the mystery unprobed. Then she pulled herself together with a laugh, and knocked sharply on the door.

A clerk admitted her, and, on hearing her name, at

once showed her into the inner office. Joan found herself facing two men, both of them strangers. One was obviously Mr. Bell himself. Large, plump, and snowy-haired, with little white side-whiskers, and an extremely pleasant and benevolent face, he reminded Joan more of a clergyman than a lawyer.

"Miss Ayre?" he enquired.

"That is my name."

There was a moment's silence, and Joan was aware that both men were regarding her with a searching glance, so keen and judging that they reminded her of buyers at a race-horse sale.

"My dear young lady," said Mr. Bell, with a most sympathetic smile, "I think I can promise you some extremely good news. Allow me to introduce my client, Mr. Norman Vaille."

Joan bowed composedly to the lawyer's companion who replied with grave courtesy. Mr. Vaille was slim, dark, and not at all bad-looking. He was well groomed, and unmistakably a gentleman. Joan's first impression was of quite a young man. But a certain hardness of the eyes, and a network of little lines at their corners, suggested that he might be over forty.

"Before we address ourselves to the vital business in hand," said Mr. Bell, beaming on Joan, as he placed a chair for her, "would you mind answering one or two brief questions about yourself, Miss Ayre —just to clear the ground, as it were?"

"Certainly," said Joan, seating herself.

"Your name is Ayre," said Mr. Bell, with a little bow, and then he paused. "Has it ever occurred to

you, Miss Ayre, to ask yourself a question—whether Ayre is, in fact, your name?"

The query astonished Joan so much, and indeed brought such a curious train of thought into her mind that, for a moment she found herself unable to answer. Mr. Bell watched her closely.

"You will understand shortly my reason for asking," he said. "Where were you born, Miss Ayre?"

"In South Georgia, U. S. A."

"And in what town?"

"It sounds absurd, but I really cannot tell you exactly where," Joan replied. The questions were puzzling her, and she flushed slightly.

"Tell us," said Mr. Bell pleasantly, "anything you know about your parents and your early life. You scarcely talk like an American."

"My mother was an English emigrant," said Joan simply. "But she died soon after I was born, and my father died a year later. I was brought up and cared for by a Scotchwoman, Janet Mackellar, who was very good to me."

There was the slightest flicker in Mr. Vaille's eyes, and the two men glanced at each other.

"Did you, then, know of no relatives of your own?" asked Mr. Bell, leaning towards her slightly.

Joan hesitated.

"There was Uncle Jim," she said. "James Lloyd. He used to come and see me at long intervals. Sometimes he would be away for a year, or even two, and he never stayed long. Janet Mackellar and I moved about a good deal, but he always found us. He was very good to me when he did come, and I

always knew him as 'Uncle Jim.' Janet told me one day that he was not my uncle; but that was after I lost sight of him for good."

"And how," asked Mr. Bell gently, "did you come to lose sight of Uncle Jim?"

Again Joan paused.

"Janet disliked him," she said in a low voice. "I was sorry, because I was fond of him, though I saw him so seldom. But somehow she disliked him, and she hated to see him with me. I think that is why we left America. We went to Charleston when I was seventeen, where I learned shorthand and typewriting, and then Janet brought me to London, just before the war. She died eighteen months later," added Joan sadly, "and I was left quite alone. Luckily, thanks to her care and kindness, I had a trade, and could earn my own living. She told me, after we had been in London some time that," concluded Joan, "Uncle Jim was no uncle of mine —and that he was dead."

"She was right," said Mr. Bell. "My dear young lady, she was right on both points, though, I think, upon the second point the wish was father to the thought. I doubt if she could know that he was dead. He was, however, killed in the War, in the year 1918. And he was not your uncle."

Joan looked at him with startled eyes.

"What does all this mean, please," she exclaimed. "And what do you know about it?"

Instead of answering, Mr. Bell opened a portfolio and placed in her hands a photograph, very old and faded, of a young man. The face was strikingly

handsome, the nostrils well chiselled, the forehead high. The eyes were set rather too close together, but were very steady and bright.

"Does that remind you, in any way, of 'Uncle Jim'?" enquired Mr. Bell, quietly.

Joan shook her head, bewildered.

"No," she replied. "Uncle Jim was much older than this, and different. He had a brown beard, too; sometimes it was cut short and round—at others, when he came to us, it was trimmed like a naval officer's. Even the nose is not the same. And yet—" she looked closer, and hesitated, "those are strangely like his eyes!"

"It may well be so," said Mr. Bell, "for we have every reason to believe that this is no other than the man you knew as 'Uncle Jim.'"

"Who, then, was he?" cried Joan, eagerly. "And what had he to do with me?"

Mr. Vaille, for the first time, intervened.

"This photograph," he said, in a grave, fluent voice, "is a portrait of Walter Travers Tallbois, grand-nephew of the eighth Lord Tallbois, and second cousin of the late peer. I knew Walter Tallbois slightly, and was at Oxford with him. He came to grief—a rather serious youthful indiscretion he was led into—and was sent by his family to Florida. His ship never arrived, she was lost with all hands, and Walter Tallbois was presumed dead.

"None the less," continued Mr. Vaille, impressively, "I, who knew him, have clues in my possession which lead me to believe that Walter Tallbois did not die—that he survived, and for reasons best

known to him, decided to bury his past, to change his name, and sink his former identity for ever. Also, that he survived many years, and that he married, in America, a lady named Helen Lloyd——"

A stifled gasp rose in Joan's throat. She trembled faintly.

"—By whom he had an only daughter," pursued Mr. Vaille. "After his wife's death he had, as many men do in the West, a somewhat chequered career, never revealing his identity, and finally met a soldier's end in France." Mr. Vaille paused. "He was almost the last of that ancient race, for the heirs of the late Lord Tallbois also fell in the war. He was your father."

Mr. Theophilus Bell stood up.

"If this is true, as I firmly believe it to be," he said quietly, "you, madam, are the legal heiress to both title and estates—Viscountess Tallbois of Knayth." He bowed gravely.

Joan rose to her feet. Her head was swimming, and her pulses beat fast. The thing was incredible at first. And yet the truth of it seemed to shine out through. To crown it came the memory of yesterday's wonderful visit to Knayth Abbey. She sank down again in the chair, and drew the portrait towards her, her eyes wet.

"My father!" she murmured.

The sinister, hawk-like eyes stared back at her from the faded portrait.

"Is it certain," asked Joan slowly, looking up at the two men, "that my—that William Tallbois, of whom you speak, is dead?"

"Absolutely certain," replied Mr. Bell sympathetically. "His name is on the roll of honour of the Foreign Legion in France. His grave is in the Argonne."

Joan found a difficulty in speaking.

"And you have found me—and called me here to tell me this?" she said, gratefully looking at the two men. "How can I thank you?"

Mr. Norman Vaille smiled.

"That, my dear madam, can be arranged," he said.

"A word of warning," said Mr. Bell, holding up his plump white hand. "You must not regard this claim already as an accomplished fact, Miss Ayre. Forgive me that I call you Miss Ayre—but for the present it will be convenient. We must look things in the face. The difficulties are great—enormous. William Tallbois has been legally presumed dead for twenty-one years. His survival has to be proved; his marriage also. It has to be proved that you are the child of that marriage. It must be shown, beyond doubt, that William Tallbois was the man who died in France.

"These things have to be made clear by legal evidence. Do not let me discourage you—it will be done. Already, Mr. Vaille holds many of the proofs. But to obtain those which are vital, to search out missing truths, and present a case which will make the claim good at law—all this may cost thousands of pounds. At the least estimate, the expenses will be great."

Joan's face fell.

"I have no money at all!" she faltered.

"Do not let that trouble you for a moment," said Mr. Bell, with a beaming smile. "Money is at your disposal. Mr. Vaille will provide all that is necessary. But, of course, he expects to be recouped."

"I will be perfectly frank with you, Miss Ayre," said Vaille. "I am very far from being a rich man—though I have some money. It is eighteen months since I stumbled across the track of this amazing story. I am perfectly certain," he said slowly, emphasizing his words, "that there was no one living, save myself, in a position to trace those clues, and discover the truth of them. There is no one, also, with the means of following them to a successful conclusion. During all that time I have been seeking the facts—with success, though there is much more to be done—and also seeking you, who had so completely disappeared. I have expended a considerable sum of money, and if this is to go forward, must expend much more. It will be, indeed, a pride and pleasure to have so great a hand in bringing about this act of justice, and winning for you the splendid position which is yours by right. But I expect to gain by it—and not to lose."

Joan understood.

"Of course!" she said warmly. "That is right and fair. All my life I might never have known anything of this. If I win," she said, her eyes sparkling, "I should consider no recompense too great for those who had helped me!"

"The sentiment does you honour, madam," said Mr. Bell soothingly, "but let me, as an old-

established lawyer, urge upon you the need of having this matter down in black and white. In clear legal form, so that your liability may not be too great, and you will know just how you stand. Here is a brief agreement, which I have drawn to Mr. Vaille's instructions, and it only requires your signature."

"Without it," added Mr. Vaille, quietly, "nothing can be done."

Joan drew the paper towards her. It was singularly clear and short, for a legal document.

"I, Joan Ayre, spinster, believing myself to have some claim on the Tallbois title and estates, hereby agree to entrust into the hands of Norman Vaille, Esquire, of 200 Park Street, W., or such others as shall be appointed by him, the collection and formulation of such evidence as it may be possible to obtain for the preferment of this claim, and its successful establishment at law.

"Furthermore, I agree to pay the said Norman Vaille, his executors or assigns, the sum of £30,000 within one month of the date when I shall enter into legal possession of the said estates.

"The said Norman Vaille shall bear all charges, legal and other, which may be incurred in connection with this claim, provided that such charges are incurred with his consent. The sum of £30,000 stated above, shall be held to cover all such charges, for which no further claim shall be made.

"In the event of failure to establish my claim, it is agreed that I am under no liability whatsoever to the

aforesaid Norman Vaille, who shall himself bear all costs, disbursements, and monetary loss."

"There!" said Mr. Bell blandly. "Does not that commend itself to you? Mr. Vaille takes the whole risk—the complete expense, however great. Should you fail, you lose not a penny. If you win, he will be moderately well recouped. My dear lady, are not these terms generous?"

"Y—Yes," murmured Joan dizzily. "But—thirty thousand pounds!" The mere sound of such a sum appalled her.

"Madam," said Mr. Vaille a little coldly, "the probate value of the Tallbois estate is over a million sterling. There will certainly be an income accumulation in cash, besides, of over £100,000. And £30,000 is not three per cent on the whole. I stand to lose the few thousands I possess. From my point of view it is a gamble—but I am a gambler. As for you, in the language of the race-course, you are 'on' a million to nothing.

"A million!" said Joan. She paused irresolute. The memory of Knayth came back to her; the spreading acres—the splendour of the halls of her ancestors. Her eyes shone.

Joan took up the pen, and with a firm hand wrote her signature at the foot of the document.

Mr. Vaille drew the deed to him, and added his own name. Mr. Theophilus Bell, who had called in his clerk to witness the signatures, now dismissed him. The two men drew a quick, faint breath of relief.

"My dear young lady," said Mr. Bell, with enthusiastic kindness, "let me congratulate you on what, I am sure, is the greatest day of your life till now. It will be followed by a day still greater. To prove to you the confidence we have in your ultimate success, and assure your present happiness of mind, Mr. Vaille has expressed his willingness to make you an actual advance in money—just to confirm the understanding between us. In a few months we expect victory. In the meantime, it is not right that Lady Tallbois should feel the pinch of circumstances. We beg your acceptance of this."

He passed across to her a cheque for £300, drawn by Norman Vaille.

Joan stared at it and flushed slightly. She shook her head.

"I cannot take this," she said.

"But why not?" persisted Mr. Bell earnestly. "It is only to be repaid in the event of your success, and soon it will be your own. We should not offer it, if we were not sure. Think of all you can do with £300."

The cheque fascinated Joan. She was only human. The thought of all she could do for Emmie and others who had been kind to her and were in need made her eyes sparkle. After all, if these men were so sure, why should she hesitate? Joan accepted the cheque, and signed a brief deed, much simpler than the other, providing for the return of it, without interest, when she came into her own. The slightest flicker of a glance passed between the two men, as she took the cheque.

"And now," said Joan, pleadingly, "tell me one thing, please. It is not only this wonderful inheritance that I am interested with. I want to hear more about my father!"

Mr. Bell held up his hand with a grave, sympathetic smile.

"My dear young lady," he said, "this must be for the near future. Mr. Vaille is still seeking. When his facts are marshalled, he will be able to tell you what you wish to know."

"You will, madam," said Mr. Vaille blandly, "learn a good deal about your father before you are much older."

"And in the meantime," said Mr. Bell, rising, "we must go forward with no delay. We shall work tirelessly in your interest. And a word of warning. It will be as well for the present to keep this affair as much as possible to yourself."

"You would else be persecuted, madam," said Mr. Vaille, "by a venal and sensation-mongering Press, which would cause you humiliation and annoyance, and obstruct the difficult work that has to be done."

"As soon as the time is ripe," concluded Mr. Bell, "a barrister will be briefed, who will conduct your case to a rapid and triumphant climax." Joan was courteously conducted to the door by the two gentlemen. "Sooner even than you anticipate, you will take your rightful place among your peers—Lady Tallbois of Knayth," said Mr. Bell, beaming upon her as he pressed her hand, "till then we shall be in daily touch with you. Good-bye, my dear young lady, good-bye—good-bye!"

Joan found herself alone in the ancient thoroughfare of Bedford Row, wondering whether she stood on her head or heels.

For some time she walked westwards through the streets like one in a dream, often nearly colliding with irritated passers-by, of whose persons and remarks she was quite unconscious. Her world seemed to have turned upside down. Then she was brought back to earth, by realizing that she was both tired and hungry.

The Russell Hotel was close at hand, and it seemed quite natural to enter the vast lounge and order tea. That revived Joan and she collected her faculties.

A peeress of England, and a millionairess! She, the little Lambeth typist. Was it true, or had she fallen into a trance? Joan took from her purse the folded cheque. Three hundred pounds! It was as wonderful as the rest, but it connected her with reality. And it was too valuable a thing to carry about. Obeying a common-sense impulse, Joan crossed to one of the lounge writing-desks, endorsed the cheque, enclosed it in an envelope with a note, and addressed it to the bank where she kept a balance of a few pounds, saved from her meagre salary, and posted it at once in the hotel letter-box. Then Joan made for Lambeth; she felt that she would explode unless she conveyed the news quickly. She burst into the shabby bed-sitting-room.

"What was it, Joan?" cried Emmie, springing up.

"Three hundred pounds!" gasped Joan, between laughter and tears, throwing her arms round Emmie's

neck. "And there's more coming. Emmie, dear, I'm going to give you the time of your life!"

Emmie's wonder, amazement, and joy were overwhelming. But a sudden instinct of caution, of which she was a little ashamed, seized Joan. She remembered Mr. Bell's warning, and decided to say nothing today, about the Tallbois inheritance. It was perfectly certain Emmie would not believe in that. She would throw cold water on the whole thing, and it would be more than Joan could bear. Emmie always disbelieved in everything. Better wait till it was certain.

"It was from my father, dear," said Joan, "who died years ago. These people, who were ever so kind, are finding out more about him. And I've signed a paper they gave me."

Emmie, after a few eager questons, grew anxious.

"I wish I'd been there!" she exclaimed. "Why, you've acted crazy, dear! What d'you know about this chap Vaille or his lawyer? You ought to have got a solicitor of your own to go over it! And this before you signed anything."

"I haven't got one," said Joan, "and I didn't think about it. Mr. Bell is acting for us both. Everything's in my favour, and I'm sure he's all right. I didn't see——"

"No!" retorted Emmie, "you little simpleton! You didn't see, and you're not sure, and you don't know what to do!"

Joan suddenly turned on Emmie, her eyes shining vividly, and her breath coming fast.

"I know just what I'm going to do, dear!" she

cried, and with an impulse that would not be denied, she hurried from the house.

Half-an-hour later Joan stood on a first floor in Fountain Court, and pressed the front-door bell of Philip Mottisfont, Esquire, barrister-at-law.

CHAPTER VIII

COUNSEL'S OPINION

FROM Emmie Clegg, Joan had kept her secret. But, despite the warning of Mr. Bell, she had not the slightest intention of keeping it from Philip Mottisfont. Surely she was entitled to the best advice. And to Joan's mind there was but one man worth consulting at the whole of the English Bar.

Mottisfont himself answered the bell, evidently just about to go out. He was in evening dress, and looked extraordinarily handsome and distinguished. When he saw who his visitor was, for once Mottisfont was taken aback.

"Miss Ayre!" he exclaimed.

"I wish to see you professionally, Mr. Mottisfont," said Joan gravely.

Philip stared.

"Professionally?" he said, looking rather bewildered. "Please come in." He showed Joan into the front chamber, and set a chair for her. She laid her gloves on the table with an air of forced composure, but her hands trembled slightly.

"I have come," she said, with a smile, "for 'Counsel's Opinion.' That's what it's called, is it not?"

The suggestion was so quaint that it seemed to Mottisfont she must have come to amuse herself at

his expense. He smiled back at her, and answered with a touch of mockery.

"Are you not aware, Madam, that it is usual to apply to Counsel through a solicitor?"

"Does that mean that you refuse?" she said, a little haughtily. Her cheeks suddenly became tinged with pink.

"No, no!" he said hastily. "I beg your pardon. You want my advice on something? I shall give it only too gladly." He seated himself, and allowed his eyes to dwell on the exquisite little face that looked up at his. "What is it that I can do?"

"I have heard that I have a claim to an inheritance."

Philip raised his eyebrows.

"Really? I congratulate you. What is it?"

"I learned today," said Joan quietly, "that, in the eyes of the Law, I am Lady Tallbois of Knayth; the inheritress of the title and estates."

Mottisfont's first thought was that Joan had suddenly become insane. Then he realized that she was perfectly serious, and suffering from an intense, suppressed excitement. Before he could say anything Joan plunged into her tale.

She did not tell it well. Her words stumbled over each other; Vaille, Bell, and the Tallbois peerage were all mixed up together in her story. But Mottisfont's keen ear caught the meaning of it, and as he listened his face showed amazement, incredulity, and when she had finished, a fierce anger. He sprang to his feet.

"This is the most infamous thing I ever heard of!" he cried hotly.

"Why?" faltered Joan aghast. Mottisfont looked down at her with infinite pity and sympathy.

"Is it possible, Miss Ayre, that you don't see this is a wicked hoax!" he exclaimed. "You are being exploited by a pair of scoundrels! They are trying to get your money out of you, if you have any. The thing is simply an absurdity! It is a case for the police. The men ought to be flogged!" he said, with a break in his voice.

Joan was very pale.

"Have I been very foolish?" she said faintly. "I didn't believe it myself, at first. But—there is a mystery about my father! And then the photograph—and Janet Mackellar. There are lots of things that all seemed to fit in so well——"

Mottisfont was startled. He saw how strung-up and overwrought she was. The professional mask came over his face, he seated himself, and with his arms on the table, began to question her skilfully and quietly. As a trained barrister knows how to soothe and put at ease an excited witness, so his voice soothed Joan. She became calmer, and told her story again. This time she told it well, omitting very little.

Philip listened with growing amazement, and slowly the look in his eyes changed. At the finish he rose to his feet.

"Good heavens!" he muttered. For a moment they stared at each other in silence.

"There is something in this!" he said in an altered voice. "I see my way through it now. Incredible though it sounds, I believe there is truth in it." He

looked at Joan with something like awe. "You—Lady Tallbois of Knayth!"

His hands fell inert to his sides. Joan's violet eyes looked up at him and smiled happily.

"I feel as if I were living in fairyland," she said. "I don't blame you for disbelieving—even I feel quite, quite sure now. I think," she added, with a little laugh, "it was my wonderful visit to Knayth that brought it home to me."

"What was that?" he asked quickly.

Joan told him. Mottisfont listened with the deepest interest. He drew a long breath, and sat back in his chair.

"I think that is the most wonderful thing of all!" he said gazing at her. "You drank from the Knayth Goblet! I know it well, and all its history. You, the heiress of the Tallbois!" he said softly. "It must be inherited instinct—transmitted to you, perhaps, by a long line of ancestors who knew and held the secret. What else could it be? It is a charming story—there is real beauty in it." He sat up and smiled. "But it is not evidence at law. Still, from what you have told me, I believe you have a good chance—I think you might succeed."

An intensely bitter, pugnacious expression came into his eyes.

"Thank goodness you came to me!" he said, very earnestly. "For, right or wrong, you have fallen among thieves. The conduct of these men is abominable. It must be stopped instantly!"

Joan looked scared.

"It seemed fair enough to me," she murmured.

"Fair! Why this man Vaille is plainly an adventurer, and his lawyer little better than a knave. His duty was to put his information in your hands, and let you take proper advice. But to entrap an unprotected girl, and trick her into such a thievish arrangement—!" Mottisfont's eyes grew savage. "I have a mind to go and interview this Vaille with a thick stick! That is what he requires. Very luckily there's no harm done. You want Counsel's opinion—here it is. That precious deed you signed is not worth the paper it's written on. It is champerty!"

"Sham—what?" asked Joan, with wide-open eyes. He turned to her, and they both laughed.

"In English law no one can bind themselves beforehand to pay any money which they may obtain through a law action. That is called champerty. This Mr. Bell knows it as well as I do. He would be lucky if he were not struck off the Rolls, should he attempt it! No judge would listen to him. Let me see this wretched deed, Miss Ayre. You have a copy, of course?"

"No, I never thought of it."

Mottisfont stared at her and gasped.

"I'm afraid," said Joan, "I've been stupid. You must think I need a keeper more than a Counsel—" She broke off confusedly and blushed. To her surprise she saw Philip blushing too. "But I can remember what it said," she added hurriedly.

Joan, who had an excellent memory, repeated the gist of the deed, almost word for word.

"It is cleverly drawn up," he said, frowning, "yet I'm sure it wouldn't stand—I could upset it in five

minutes. They wouldn't get a penny. You must get clear of this at once!" he said eagerly. "It is only fair, of course, to tell them so now. Put your case in the hands of an honest solicitor."

Joan's eyes were troubled.

"But if I did not dispute it?" she asked. "If I chose to pay? Couldn't I do so?"

"Of course," said Philip, with a shrug. "If you contracted to pay the whole fortune, and did it, no one could prevent you."

"Then I shall pay!" said Joan, "and the thing must go forward; I have given my word." She lifted her chin higher, and looked at him obstinately. "If I am Lady Tallbois of Knayth—or even Joan Ayre, typist—there is no question of my going back on it. Of my own free will I signed that deed. Law or no law, I shall hold by it!"

"But consider!" protested Philip. "Honour does not bind you to a swindle like that! It horrifies me to think of your being bound to such people!"

"Even if they are what you say," replied Joan, "and I cannot believe it—my answer is the same. I stand to lose nothing, and they have trusted me. That is final."

Philip saw she was resolute. He could find no words.

"But there is a greater thing you can do for me!" said Joan earnestly. "There will have to be a barrister, will there not, to present the case? I would rather have you do it, if you will, than any one at the Bar. Will you take it up, Mr. Mottisfont, and fight it through for me?"

Philip's eyes shone. He looked at her eagerly. What a splendid case to appear in—the Tallbois Claimant case! And Joan—for whom he was ready to do anything on earth. Then his face fell.

"Miss Joan, there is nothing that would give me such pleasure! I would rather lead in this case than any in England. But"—he looked at her as proudly as she herself had done a moment ago—"at present you make this impossible! Do you understand the standard of the Bar? I couldn't accept a brief from such a rogue as this man Bell—no, not if it were to save my own neck. You must cut adrift from him!"

Joan shook her head sadly, and held out her hand to Philip.

"Good-bye," she said.

"You don't mean that!" he gasped. Joan was silent. She made him open the door for her.

"Listen," she said suddenly, "I will find a way through this. I have set my heart on having you for Counsel in the Tallbois case."

"In all the world I ask nothing better!" he said, "but there is only one way in which it can be done. Do not go yet, or at least let me accompany you back—it is late."

Joan held up her hand.

"No!" she said, with a charming, decisive little gesture of command. "This, Mr. Mottisfont, is a purely professional visit."

She bowed to him formally and, with a brief "good night," walked sedately down the staircase.

CHAPTER IX

THE NEW JOAN

THE next morning Joan, who had kept her own counsel overnight, astonished Emmie by donning her best dress, a neat and alluring little costume of pale blue muslin, which she had not yet worn.

"Hulloa! Goin' to waste those glad-rags on the office, dear?" exclaimed Emmie.

"I'm not going to the office," replied Joan, with a musical little laugh. "You may tell them so, if you like, Emmie. I've better things to do today, and I'm going to do them."

"What!" gasped Emmie. "Joan! What am I to tell Miss Puttock, then?"

"Anything you please, dear."

"Why, she'll sack you!" cried Emmie, "as sure as eggs are eggs!"

Joan turned to her friend with eyes sparkling mischievously, and a smile on her lips.

"Then let her!" said Joan. "She has paid me less and worked me harder, because I'm a new-comer, than any one else. Miss Puttock has often been grossly rude to me, and refused abruptly the one small favour I once asked of her. I stood it all quite humbly; I bear her no ill-will. But there's something in me that declines absolutely to beg her for a day off

that she will certainly not give. And so I shall take it."

Emmie regarded her with consternation.

"Do you think three hundred pounds is going to last for ever, Joan?"

"It would keep me for two years, anyhow," returned Joan briskly. "If that were all. But it isn't. Emmie, you needn't look at me like that. I'm going to be rich and free, and I believe it in spite of anybody who doubts it. I feel it in my bones! There are some things, dear, that I haven't even dared to tell you, yet. But I feel like a bird that has been uncaged, and you must let me flutter my wings."

She strode to the window and turned back again, laughing to see Emmie's rather scared face. Joan's eyes were shining, and her cheeks flushed. She was as dainty and fascinating as ever, more so if possible, and wore an air of obstinacy and rebellion that Emmie had never before seen or suspected in her friend.

"All my life I have done what other people ordered me to do," cried Joan. "Now at last I'll do what I choose! I want to know the splendour of the world—to travel among the nations and the great roaring cities—to mix with those who know how to live. I want to taste the Wine of Life!"

She threw out her arms.

"Come with me, Emmie! You are the best little friend I ever had. There is more than enough for both. I tell you it cannot fail. Come with me along the primrose path."

Emmie shook her head.

"Not me," she said grimly. "A pretty sight I'd be, with a figure like mine, gallivanting over primroses an' roarin' cities. I don't know what you mean by the 'Wine of Life.' A steady job with a fair wage, an' a week-end at Margate now an' then is my mark—and yours, too."

She rose abruptly.

"I think you're crazy, Joan. There's a funny streak breakin' out in you today. I'd never have suspected it of you! As soon see a Sunday-school pupil-teacher goin' dotty! Put on your hat an' come along to Puttock and Copes."

But argument, reason, and entreaty were wasted; after some futile efforts Emmie had to give it up, and departed for the office, looking decidedly worried and anxious.

Joan, left to herself, cleared the table and began hurriedly to write a couple of letters. They took her some time. Then she looked through her belongings in the housemaid's chest of drawers she shared with Emmie, and took counsel with herself before the looking-glass, and made a face at her reflection. Then she donned the least distasteful of her two hats and left the house.

By tram and tube she journeyed from the wilds of Lambeth to Oxford Street, and in a telephone call-office she rang up Mr. Theophilus Bell. Miss Joan Ayre desired to see Mr. Bell, and if possible Mr. Vaille as well, as soon as it could be arranged. So ran Joan's message.

Mr. Bell, after some delay, replied that he could arrange for Mr. Vaille to be at the office at a little

before six. He hoped that Miss Ayre would not insist on it unless the matter was urgent. Joan replied that it was. It seemed to her that Mr. Bell's voice over the telephone sounded rather anxious. Joan hung up the receiver.

"I'm going to have my own way," she said to herself demurely, as she left the call-office. "If a peeress in her own right can't do that, what can she do?"

Joan went back to her bank, and enquired whether she could draw against the cheque that had been posted the night before. After consulting with his manager, the cashier agreed. She wrote out a draft for £40. And while writing it Joan paused momentarily to consider.

It occurred to her that Philip Mottisfont, barrister, had not given her any advice about this three hundred pounds. And for the very good reason that it was the one thing she had forgotten to mention to him. Was she doing a particularly unwise thing?

But only for a few seconds did Joan hesitate. Had they not been absolutely certain of success they would not have advanced the money. And she was to pay them thirty thousand! It would be absurd not to make use of what was in hand. Joan cashed the draft.

She left the bank feeling like a child to whom a benevolent uncle has given a sovereign. Her eyes shone softly, her cheeks were faintly flushed pink; the pavements seemed to have springs beneath her feet. The money crackled in the little shabby purse. Joan bought a new one—a pretty little thing of lizard skin.

At the first jeweller's she purchased a wrist-watch for Emmie. It was a golden morning for the emancipated typist. All the delightful, attractive things that for years had been barred out of her life by plate-glass windows were now within her reach. Joan bought some wonderful gloves, a stole, shoes such as she had sometimes dreamed of, and finally an exquisite little hat, the most perfect among five that had a whole shop window to themselves in Regent Street.

She committed no wild extravagances, but all the things she bought were the best of their kind, and in admirable taste. Then Joan called a halt. She lunched at a restaurant she would never before have thought of entering. The walls were cream and old gold; a string band made soft music behind a background of palms.

There were many present who wondered at the amazing beauty of the girl who sat alone at the little table, and whose glorious eyes looked so pensive. For of a sudden, as though by some jarring chord, the joy and novelty of it all were blotted from Joan's mind, giving place to a wave of sadness and doubt.

"There is but one thing on earth that I want," she said to herself. "Unless it comes to me, all the rest will be dust and ashes."

On the stroke of six, she presented herself that evening at the office of Bedford Row. Both gentlemen were there to receive her.

"Good evening, Miss Ayre," said Mr. Bell, with a somewhat forced smile.

Joan bowed, a little coldly. It struck her that,

somehow, they did not look quite so sure of themselves as yesterday. Mr. Bell was grave, Mr. Vaille's handsome nose seemed a little on one side. They gave the impression of men who had passed a bad night.

"I am afraid we have no fresh news for you as early as this," said the lawyer, with a tinge of impatience. "Mr. Vaille is working most actively."

"I am sure Mr. Vaille will do his utmost," answered Joan, seating herself, "but I have called about quite a different matter. Thank you so much for according me this interview, which is necessary, because I want to give you my instructions."

They both stared at her, wondering if they had heard aright.

"Your—instructions, Miss Ayre?" echoed Mr. Bell.

"Yes," replied Joan, calmly. "First, will you tell me when, as nearly as possible—the—the case will be ready for trial, or whatever it is called?"

"No, madam, we cannot. It may take six months; it may only take a few weeks," said Vaille. "There are vital gaps which I must fill."

"But when it is all complete," persisted Joan, "a barrister will be needed to take charge of the case, and win it. Is not that so?"

"Precisely," said Mr. Bell, smiling. "And we shall select one who is unsurpassed for the business. Indeed, he is already retained."

"Then will you please strike him out," said Joan politely. "There is a barrister, one of the cleverest at the Bar, whom I wish to appear in this case, and to have charge of it—Mr. Philip Mottisfont."

The two men gazed at her with stupefaction.

"Philip Mottisfont, of the Middle Temple?" said Mr. Bell.

"Yes."

"Out of the question, Miss Ayre!" exclaimed Mr. Bell. "A worse man could not possibly be selected. A case like this is not in Mottisfont's line at all. He is very well in his way, but a young man, and overrated. We cannot afford to risk failure."

"He is not overrated!" flashed back Joan. "He is the cleverest man at the Bar. I wish him to be briefed!"

Vaille suppressed an inward oath. There was a pause. Mr. Bell watched the girl with keen eyes, and her heightened colour did not escape him. After a moment's hesitation he came close to Joan and leaned upon the table.

"My dear young lady!" he said in his most fatherly voice, with his pleasantest smile, "pray be guided by me—a lawyer of thirty years' standing. Believe that I have your interests at heart, or I should never have touched this case. Can you know as much of barristers as I? Counsel is invariably selected by the solicitor in charge, and there are a hundred reasons why I should brief a man who can ensure success. I am sure you will see as we do. Has not Mr. Vaille treated you with the utmost generosity?"

"I think," said Vaille quietly, "that Miss Ayre will know better than to wreck her own chances."

He, too, came nearer to her. He was standing over her chair. There seemed to be a covert, unspoken threat in the attitude of the two men. For

the first time, Joan felt a sense of uneasiness—a thrill, almost, of fear. She looked up at them steadily, scanning their faces.

"Did Mr. Mottisfont himself make this suggestion?" queried Mr. Bell slowly. "If so, it is somewhat curious conduct in a barrister."

"He did not," replied Joan. "He refused to have anything whatever to do with it—as it stands now." Mr. Bell's eyes narrowed, and he watched her closely. "I do not know much about law, but surely the difficulty is easily overcome. You represent Mr. Vaille, who obtains the evidence. I naturally ought to have a solicitor to represent myself, and as you object, he will brief what barrister I choose."

There was dead silence.

"Is this wise, madam?" said Vaille at last. "It is I who stand to lose. The case seems hardly worth my attention. Is this Mr. Mottisfont a magician that he can procure proofs from empty air? Without my aid, there would be no brief to draw up."

"You mean," said Joan, "that I should lose my peerage, and you your thirty thousand. Perhaps so. But I know quite well that the bond I signed, Mr. Bell, is not valid. If at the end I chose to fight, any Court of Equity could upset your claim."

These extraordinarily legal terms that flowed so confidently from Joan's rose-petal lips morally staggered the two men. Vaille could hardly believe his ears.

"And yet," said Joan, turning in her chair to face him. "I will tell you now, once and for all, that I shall hold to that bond, whatever happens! If I win the fortune that is my right I will pay you your

thirty thousand pounds in full. I have given my word and I shall keep it." She rose to her feet. "But the barrister who fights this case will be Mr. Mottisfont, and no other!"

Vaille was about to break out, but Mr. Bell gave him, behind Joan's back, a swift glance of warning.

"My dear madam!" said Mr. Bell, with his most charming smile, "you must have your way. I did not realize how you were set upon it. We thank you for your expression of confidence, and we shall find means of arranging exactly what you desire. Have no fear—and give us twenty-four hours."

Joan smiled too, and gave her hand to each of them in turn. But as she was ushered out of the door she turned back.

"I thank you," she said, "and remember, my decision is unalterable!"

When the door closed Mr. Vaille swore with heartfelt fluency.

"The time has come to twist the screw," he said bitterly. 'And twist it hard!"

"We must communicate with the Chief at once!" said Mr. Bell, moving to the telephone. "A slight difficulty was to be looked for, and I was ready for it. But this! I was watching the girl sharply, and an undreamed-of complication has arisen which may wreck our plans. We need drastic measures for it."

"What do you mean?" said Vaille staring.

Mr. Bell's serene self-possession suddenly fell away from him.

"Don't you see, you fool!" he rasped, "that she is in love with this cursed fellow, Mottisfont!"

CHAPTER X

THE SHADOW FALLS

"GENTLEMEN," said Mr. Callaghan, adjusting his spectacles, "give yourselves no concern as to Philip Mottisfont. And here let me congratulate you. The ewe lamb is found, branded, tied, and delivered into the fold." He rolled a cigar between his lips appreciatively. "There remains only the pleasant operation of shearing."

"And may the wool be white and abundant," remarked Vaille, emptying his wineglass with much relief. "Chief, your manner of sweeping aside difficulties is regal. I confess the intrusion of this man Mottisfont shocked me."

"It is an annoyance," said Mr. Callaghan, "which will be overcome. I am not unprepared for it. True, Philip Mottisfont is one of the cleverest juniors at the Bar. He is ambitious, vindictive, and a fortune-hunter. Like ourselves, he is on the make. He is a stumbling block, but far from being a fatal one."

"Would it not be as well," said Mr. Bell, with an air of breathing a prayer, "to have him removed?"

"That might become necessary," said Mr. Callaghan, "but we shall avoid it for the present; at this juncture it would attract an undesirable amount of attention. As you know, I am against crude methods,

except in urgent cases; I will show you how to fight Mottisfont, for we hold every card in the game. We have found the girl; the proofs and the prize are in our hands."

"I think," said Vaille, "we ought to drink to Slaney. He has surpassed himself."

Drummond and Mr. Bell, agreeing heartily, passed each other the decanter. An atmosphere of success and of quiet triumph filled the luxurious room.

"I have conveyed my appreciation to Slaney," said Mr. Callaghan thoughtfully, "though actually the arrival of Joan at Knayth was no more than a lucky accident; any one less intelligent than Slaney might easily have allowed it to escape him. He proved and clinched it with the acumen we always expect from him. A humble but useful member, Slaney has but one failing—he is a coward. I fear nothing but a coward. However, on this occasion no courage was needed; he was dealing with a woman, and I am very pleased with him."

Mr. Callaghan surveyed the company benevolently over the top of his spectacles.

"She is the girl, beyond any shadow of a doubt," said Vaille, "though Bell and I had some anxious moments till we were certain. If you had seen her sitting in that chair, Chief, with her rosebud mouth open, and her eyes like saucers, it would have appealed greatly to your peculiar sense of humour. She is an admirable subject—unsophisticated, simple, and honest. A perfect little fool."

"I am not quite sure of that last," murmured Mr. Bell. "She showed a certain intelligence in trying

to saddle us with Mottisfont, and I detected an unmistakable strain of wilfulness. But she is human—very human. Was it not funny, Vaille, when, with that pathetic little semiquaver in her voice, she enquired about her dead father?"

Mr. Bell's plump form shook all over with silent merriment.

"As the daughter of one of the most elusive scoundrels ever hunted by the police," said Callaghan, "and whose neck would be forfeited to the gallows were he alive, an element of humour certainly surrounds her. However, you in particular, Bell, have served me well. You have secured for us the bond for £30,000—a perfect sum; not so large that it drives her to fight us. A touch of genius there, Bell, and even if she refused to pay, I have a hold over her that would make resistance useless. But, in any case, she is going to stand by that bond, as I predicted she would."

"I am glad of it," said Mr. Bell, "for I don't know what your powers are, Chief, but I warned you, as an expert, the bond might be successfully fought at law. I may possibly get struck off the Rolls, before this job is ended. It has surprised me frequently that such a thing has not happened before today. It is an event that would cause me no great grief," added Mr. Bell blandly. "My activities as an obscure solicitor are hardly worth mentioning compared with my share in the delightfully interesting firm of Callaghan & Co. Still, a little camouflage is always desirable."

He looked round benevolently at his companions.

"We are a curious company, are we not? Drummond, a young man of excellent connections, a member of the best clubs, with the *entre* to circles that command respect everywhere. Vaille, also well-born and well educated, an authority on big game shooting, and with a military career of some distinction. Myself, a humble professional man, cultivating those peculiar gifts which fit me to succeed as a blood-sucker on the arteries of Society. I am convinced we have in Joan Tallbois the richest vein ever approached." He laid down his cigar. "Let us put it to ourselves that Jim Carey is in our debt, and we propose to deal with his daughter as a realizable asset."

"In actual fact," said Mr. Callaghan carelessly, "*we* are in debt to Jim Carey. We owed him fifteen hundred pounds over the Welthorpe Diamonds affair at the time he disappeared. Had he returned, we should loyally have paid him in full. It is a further reason to congratulate ourselves on his demise. We shall not be hampered for lack of funds. There is six thousand pounds banked. In this room I have sixteen hundred in cash, for immediate needs. The entire case, to the moment of victory, will not cost us two thousand pounds."

"If the girl and Mottisfont combine—" began Bell.

"Let them!" broke in Mr. Callaghan grimly. "I am the power in the background, and I hold the trumps. Win she cannot without my help. That is the first card.

"Secondly—" Mr. Callaghan paused for some seconds. "But no! As I said before, gentlemen, I shall withhold the second coup even from you until

the time is ripe." The eyes behind the spectacles shone glassily. "I will only remark that when my final move is made, Joan Tallbois will have occasion to regret that the late Slim Jim didn't die without issue. Really," he concluded with a metallic chuckle, "I could almost find it in my heart to sympathize with the girl!"

He rose and moved towards a bookshelf that stood against the wall and laid his hand on it.

"Here," he said, "lies the collected evidence that will establish the charming Joan as Lady Tallbois, and which neither money nor power could trace without our sanction. We have the whip hand, and we shall use it."

The bookshelf swung back from the wainscot. Behind it the panel opened, disclosing the front of a small, but massive and very modern, safe, let into the wall. Mr. Callaghan felt in his pocket and produced a bunch of keys.

"It is time," he said, "to produce those proofs, and give you your orders."

The others moved to his side quickly.

"The game promises not only profit, but entertainment," grinned Vaille, relighting his cigar. He paused and looked up. "A curious thought has strayed into my mind," he said, with rather a wry smile. "Imagine for a moment, you fellows, what a very odd position we should be in if Slim Jim rose from the dead and learned our plans regarding his only daughter!"

A silence fell on the company. Callaghan fumbled with the keys. Drummond and Vaille and Mr. Bell

looked at each other. Then, as with a common accord, their gaze travelled to that sinister, bearded portrait that hung over the mantelpiece. Its eyes seemed to answer them.

"In normal cases I have pretty strong nerves," said Drummond softly. "But I think, in an event like that, I should take cover."

"He was a remarkable man," said Mr. Bell, with a faint shudder. "The members of our little syndicate have always been strictly loyal to each other—especially when he was among us. If anything went wrong, he was absolutely pitiless."

"Pitiless!" echoed Vaille. "He was the cruellest and most ruthless devil that ever walked this earth. I am hardly a model person myself, but I think the world was well rid of Slim Jim Carey. If he——"

Mr. Callaghan shook the bunch of keys impatiently.

"Gentlemen," he protested, "let us return, if you please, to common sense! All that was mortal of Jim Carey was shattered by a German shell, and lies under three feet of Argonne clay. We are not dwelling in fairyland—we are engaged in urgent business."

He turned the combinations, and inserted the key in the lock. It worked stiffly and with some difficulty, to his surprise.

"Here," he said impressively, as the safe door swung open, "we have the whip that will drive Joan Tallbois down the road that her father travelled."

His voice died away in a whisper. He stood staring blankly at the safe. Suddenly he fell to his knees and groped round the interior with clutching hands.

There was nothing there—save a hundred pounds in bank-notes.

"Empty!" he gasped. "The proofs are gone!"

"And the money?" cried Bell trembling.

"Fifteen hundred pounds taken. But the proofs—the proofs!"

Vaille picked up the roll of bank-notes dazedly. A slip of paper fluttered from them. He picked it up and held it to the light.

"What's this?" he said.

The others gathered round him quickly. On the slip of paper were less than a dozen words, written, or rather printed, in neat capitals. The five men read it in silence. And this is what they read:

IF YOU VALUE YOUR LIVES, LEAVE JOAN TALLBOIS ALONE.

Vaille's pupils contracted slowly, like a cat's. An inch of ash shook itself from Drummond's cigar and streamed over his clothes. The plump features of Mr. Bell turned a sickly green colour. Callaghan's face was as the face of a devil.

The Chief seized hold of the safe door. On either side of the lock was a tiny, neatly driven hole through the chilled steel. He rose slowly to his feet.

"Vaille," he said thickly, "you were right. There is but one man of our generation who could have done this job. That is his message. Here on the safe door I recognize his handiwork. We are up against Jim Carey in the flesh, and he has robbed us of every weapon we held—save one!"

CHAPTER XI

THE KEY TO VICTORY

"I WILL handle this Tallbois case," said Philip Mottisfont decisively. "Nobody shall touch it but me. The problem is to get Joan out of the hands of those two sharpers at any cost. But it must be done legally. I dare touch nothing underhand."

He threw himself back in the chair before his desk and frowned thoughtfully.

"The devil is that this man Vaille has got his fists tightly on the evidence—proofs that doubtless he alone can supply. The Law cannot make him give them up; he would deny their existence unless he got his price. He holds the trumps—he can either rob the girl, or wreck her chance. It is a ghastly situation; I foresee tragedy in it! How to get them from him?"

He rose and paced the room, thinking busily.

"It is a deadlock," he muttered. "And yet——"

There was a knock at the door, and Mottisfont's silent man-servant entered, bringing a large registered package on a tray. Philip signed for it, and glancing curiously at the package, opened it. It was very securely sealed, and covered by several wrappers.

There was quite a large bulk of closely written papers, stamped documents and forms, all neatly

docketed and secured with rubber bands. On the top was a slip of paper, with a heading printed with pen and ink in orderly capital letters. As Mottisfont read it he gave a slight gasp.

EVIDENCE CONFIRMING THE CLAIM OF JOAN TALLBOIS TO THE TITLE AND ESTATES OF TALLBOIS OF KNAYTH. COMPLETE HEREWITH

Philip's amazement turned to swift contempt.

"Who has played this fool's trick on me!" he exclaimed. He snatched up the envelope and scrutinized it. The printed address was exactly similar in form to the letters of the heading. "Philip Mottisfont, Esq., Barrister-at-Law, Fountain Court, Temple." He turned over the documents rapidly.

It was a hoax, of course—a bald attempt at swindling. The "evidence" surely was rubbish. What was the object of it all? And yet, as Philip scanned the documents his face changed.

"Marriage certificate—William Travers Tallbois—Helen Lloyd, spinster," he muttered, picking up one of them and staring at it. "Calcarth, South Georgia. Certified copy."

He took up the next.

"Certificate of birth—Tallbois, Joan Lechlade—daughter of William and Helen Tallbois—Lexonville—October, 1899. Signed by registrar—why, it's the original!"

With hands that trembled slightly he searched through the other and longer documents, glancing eagerly at each one with keen eyes. His excitement increased.

"Good heavens!" he exclaimed. "This stuff is genuine. It's the goods! The very evidence Joan wants—the proof of her claim. A magnificent case! Just the matter that I thought beyond her reach. But who in the world has sent it to me?"

He tore open the envelope and coverings, laying them bare, searching minutely all through the papers. There was no trace of any letter enclosed, no sender's name, nothing but those few printed and unsigned words. Yet a fortune would hardly have covered the value of those documents that arrived in a simple package.

Baffled, Mottisfont threw himself into a chair and went through the enclosures, reading them over rapidly. Of all the cases, criminal or civil, that had ever come within his ken, this was the most amazing. It held him fascinated. Trained barrister as he was, the skill with which the varied proofs had been got together and verified, step by step, elicited his admiration. Before he was halfway through Mottisfont rose to his feet.

"It's stupendous!" he cried. "Imagine this before the House of Lords! I'd give a hundred guineas to know whence it came, for there's nothing here that cannot be proved up to the hilt. We must find that out. It could not have been——"

His man opened the door.

"A lady to see you, sir."

It was Joan, very self-possessed, in a smart walking costume. Mottisfont came forward eagerly, and seized both her hands in his. She seemed surprised at this unusual vehemence.

"You come at the very moment!" he exclaimed. "I was just about to try and find you. I've the greatest news for you!"

"Ah!" said Joan quickly. "Does that mean you will undertake my case for me, after all?"

"Most emphatically I will—and only too gladly! But that is not the news. Let me show you——"

"Wait," said Joan. "One moment; let me tell you what I have done."

She described her second interview with Messrs. Vaille and Bell. Mottisfont laughed joyously.

"Splendid!" he exclaimed. "You said exactly the right thing. You have dropped a bomb into that camp. But please come here and look at these amazing papers I have received. Do you know anything of them? Have you ever seen them before?"

Joan shook her head. She turned over the documents.

"What are they?"

"The proofs that you are Lady Tallbois of Knayth!"

Joan looked at him and gave a little gasp.

"You are wonderful," she cried. "How did you get them?"

"That is what I want to know." He told her how they had arrived. "Don't give me credit for it—the thing is a complete mystery. Can you throw no light on it?"

"None," said Joan, her face alight with excitement. "If anybody had them I should have thought it would be Mr. Vaille. He cannot have sent them?"

"Vaille? He is the last man on earth to do such

a thing. These papers are worth a fortune. Miss Joan, there is something extraordinary behind this case, something I cannot yet fathom at all. Why are these things sent to me anonymously? But it is useless to theorize. For the moment all we can consider is the fact—here is that vital evidence which builds up your case. It is a wonderful piece of luck, for all these proofs would have taken a year to trace—even then the tracer might have failed."

"You are sure it is genuine."

"Unless all these are brilliantly clever forgeries—which I refuse to believe. Such an effort would be foolish and useless; it would never bear the light of the open courts. No, I think we can rely on this, as far as it goes—and it goes very far. Do you wish to learn more of the secret of your life—and your father's—as it is set out in these strange documents?"

"Yes," cried Joan eagerly, her cheeks flushing red. "Show me!"

He set a chair for her before the papers.

"Now," said Mottisfont, "we need not wade through the whole of this bulk of matter, much of which you would find tedious. That will be lawyer's work. But I will give you the outline."

"That will be best."

He placed in her hands the marriage papers and the certificate. Joan's fingers trembled slightly as she held them. It was as though a clear white light was flung upon the darkness of her early childhood—days of which she knew, or could remember nothing. Here were the proved names of that father and mother who, till now, had been not even names.

"Those speak for themselves," said Mottisfont quietly. "I needn't explain them. And here is an enormously important point, perhaps the most important point of all. The name of the ship that picked your father up at sea, the day after the disaster to the liner, and the name of that ship's captain, with the statement that he is still living."

Joan drew a sharp breath.

"Then why has he never come forward?" she cried.

"You forget that your father changed his name. It is given here, and vouched for. He called himself, for some reason, Le Mesurier."

The girl nodded.

"He had his reasons, of course, for wishing to sink the past for ever—and here they are." Philip passed on rapidly. "But the surprising thing is that once, and once only, he went back on that. He married under his own name—William Travers Tallbois—in this obscure little Southern town where he took Helen Lloyd to wife. That is an amazing thing."

Joan turned in the chair, her eyes flashing.

"I love him for it!" she cried, a lump rising in her throat. "Do you not see that he did this because, whatever hung over him he would not marry a woman under false colours! Whatever else he may have done, he gave my mother the name that was his by right—because he loved her!"

"True," said Philip, "no doubt it must be so. And a fortunate thing it is for you, his daughter. It makes things enormously easier for you in this crisis. Had he married under a false name, the difficulty of proving it would have been much greater.

"However, after he lost your mother," continued Philip gently, "or even before that, the name of William Tallbois is not heard of again, yet we can connect Le Mesurier again and again, and the proofs of that connection, given here, are good. I am used to sifting evidence, and this evidence seems to me very sound." He paused. "Finally, it is Le Mesurier who enlists in the Foreign Legion and dies in France. That will be quite easy to establish; all the facts are given here."

"Then everything I need is in your hands!" exclaimed Joan, "and there is nothing to do but begin the case and win."

Philip hesitated.

"You are asking a lawyer to do a great deal," he said, "in committing himself to such a statement. We are a cautious race. You know 'there's many a slip' in the law courts."

"But you believe it a certainty—now?" she cried.

"I thought so when first I went through this stuff. We have almost everything. But there are just two beads missing from the string. We've got to have those. One is the ship's captain who saved your father. We must find him in the flesh. That, I am sure, can be overcome. I see my way through it.

"The other is more difficult. You are Joan Tallbois; yet you live for years with this excellent woman, Janet Mackellar, who must have known something of your beginnings. Yet you never heard of your name—Tallbois, till a week ago, never reached your ears. You were called Joan Ayre through all that

long time. Why? What does it mean? Here is a considerable hiatus, Miss Joan, which will have to be filled in and explained. There is nothing about it in these papers."

Joan's face was troubled. She considered a few moments, and then looked up at him quickly.

"I have thought of something," she said. "I expect you will judge me foolish for not having spoken of it before, but until now I never thought it could matter. Janet Mackellar, who brought me from America, died in London some time ago. She left a will in my favour."

"A will!" exclaimed Mottisfont. Suddenly he checked himself and raised his head as if listening. With three swift, silent strides he reached the door and flung it open.

No one was there. The corridor was empty. At the end of it, in a little open room used for a pantry, Mottisfont's man-servant was silently polishing silver. Philip glanced at the man's back and, returning slowly to the room, closed the door.

"What is the matter?" asked Joan.

"I thought I heard a rustle at the door," he said. "I suspected eavesdroppers."

"It is strange," said Joan. "I believed I heard something too."

"Must have been fancy. No one there but my servant, and he is out of reach. A stupid fellow, and reliable. This queer case of ours puts queer thoughts into one's head. You were saying Janet Mackellar made you her legatee. This is important. What did she leave you?"

"Only a little money. I think it was fifty or eighty pounds. Poor Janet had not much. The funny thing is, I didn't get it. I was only nineteen at the time. She tied it up till——"

"Till you were of age?"

"I was of age last month. No, she tied it up till I was twenty-five, or until I was married," said Joan, with a slight blush, "if it should happen before that. Dear old Janet had queer ideas. She thought I should want it more then. When she died I had a good job, and a little saved. But all that doesn't matter. With the money she left a sealed package, which was only to be delivered to me when I came into the money. That's what I now think may be important. I was not to learn what was in that package, you see, till I was either twenty-five or married. I often think there was information in it for me, which she would never give while she was alive. She always refused to answer my question. Sometimes I think she was a little mad."

"Ah!" said Philip keenly. "And was the will upheld? What became of it? Never mind the money—where is that package?"

"The will was all right. The money and the package are in charge of some official—I forget his name. The——"

"The Public Trustee?"

"Yes, that was it."

"Good!" said Mottisfont. "You have hit the very mark, Miss Joan. It is fifty to one that sealed information from your old guardian is the one clue that will throw light on a dark chapter—the final

nail that will clinch your claim and give you your peerage. I will get hold of that!"

"But shall I have to wait till I am twenty-five?" asked Joan, "or else," she added, laughing, "get married at once."

Mottisfont caught his breath. He looked at her strangely for a moment, and there was a pause. Then he smiled.

"There is no need for you to take such a terrible step as that," he said. "We shall apply for a mandamus from the High Court, allowing that package to be opened and its contents made known. It is difficult, but with such great interests involved I shall be able to do it. Even the Public Trustee will have to bow there. And now, Miss Joan—or shall I say Lady Tallbois?"

"Miss Joan, please," she answered, laughing

"Nothing remains but for me to get to work. I have told you all I can."

"Haven't you left out a good deal?" she said, after a moment's silence. "I mean, about my father, after he disappeared. You came very quickly to an end there."

Philip hesitated. He grew very grave.

"I have something difficult to say to you," he murmured. "Shall I speak plainly?"

"If you please."

"It seems to me, from these documents, that your father may have some time been in rather serious trouble. I do not mean the escapade which made him leave England. Sometime later, in America. Evidently some jostle with the law. I am unable to say

even now what it is. Perhaps nothing very serious. But this case may throw a strong light on your father, and one, possibly, painful to you. But perhaps we can avoid it."

Joan raised her head, and looked him full in the face, proudly and with a touch of obstinacy.

"He was my father," she said, "and whatever he may have done I will never forget that. I shall be as loyal as lies within my power to him, and to his memory, as though he were alive. I will uphold and shield that memory at all costs. That is my last word."

There was a flash in Joan's eyes, a difference in her whole attitude and personality at that moment that startled Mottisfont. But he found her more intensely fascinating than ever.

"Be it so!" he said. "I see you have courage. Well, I must go forward with the work. And I will not rest till I know how and why these documents have reached me."

"When shall I hear from you again?"

"I may have news sooner than you think. We must keep in close touch. Look here, Miss Joan, why not dine with me tonight—at the Carlton?"

Joan's eyes sparkled. Then she looked at Philip thoughtfully.

"It is a good thing," he said, smiling, "for a lady litigant to dine with her counsel. And very respectable."

"It keeps him up to his job, I suppose," laughed Joan. "Thank you, I shall be charmed. I'll be there at eight. Mind you have something exciting to tell me."

"There'll be no lack of excitement, as far as I can see, in the Tallbois case," replied Philip, as he showed her out.

At a little after eight Joan arrived at the Carlton lounge. Mottisfont was waiting for her. Vastly different was his attitude now from what it had been at Puttock and Copes. He regarded Joan with mingled satisfaction and respect; her daintiness and charm for some moments held him almost tongue-tied. She wore a simple but exquisite little evening frock in *mousseline-de-soie* of a fairy-faint blue, evidently a product of some famous dressmaker.

"You look as if you approved of me," she said, laughing.

"How could I not? I have an artistic eye," replied Philip, as they walked to the dining-room.

"Have you solved the mystery yet?"

"No. But I have been in consultation with a great solicitor, one whom you could trust with the Crown Jewels, and he will act with me. I want you to meet him soon."

"I don't call that at all exciting," pouted Joan. "Let's forget all about lawyers and things for an hour. This place," she added, "is a little different from the A. B. C. tea-shop where I used to lunch. What a wonderful world I have plunged into!"

They dined at a table that gave them a view of the whole room. Joan tasted the Wine of Life that night—only a sip, as yet, but a childish happiness filled her. The soft lights, the flowers, the perfect service, the fluting throb of violins behind the palms —above all the throng of easy-mannered, happy

people, all struck a sympathetic chord in her. Philip could scarcely take his eyes from the girl.

"Does all this seem very strange to you?" he asked, when the coffee came.

"No," said Joan pensively, "not at all. That's the queer thing about it. I should, I expect, if I were wearing my old linen blouse and serge skirt; then I should feel stupid and out of place. But I feel perfectly happy and natural. It must be my clothes."

"There is more in it than that," said Philip. "Your forbears, for centuries, were people accustomed to only the best of things—the broad and lighted way." He sighed a little. "Now that it is within your reach, you claim it as your right, quite naturally. There will be a big public stir in this country," he added, smiling, "when your claim is made known."

"Yes, I suppose so. But I'm told I ought to keep it secret as long as possible."

"I disagree with that absolutely," said Mottisfont very earnestly. "If you will let me say so, the man Vaille gave you that advice for his own purposes. Since the case has got to be made known, then the sooner the better."

"You think so?"

"I know it. Publicity is your best weapon. It may be troublesome, but it will throw a bright light on the knavery and mystery which I can feel hanging around us, yet cannot trace. Newspapers may be trying, but they are an immense help to the law in bringing forth unexpected proofs. Secrecy is only

for rogues. I hope you will let me make your claim known."

"I dislike fame," said Joan. "But you are wiser than I, and you shall do whatever you think best." Philip thanked her eagerly. "Why, who is this?"

Joan changed colour slightly as she looked up, and in a moment was on her guard.

Two fashionably dressed women were passing the table at the moment, and, pausing, stared at Joan. One of them, dark and slim, was Hilda Detchmere, whom she had seen on the houseboat *Nepenthe*. A glitter of anger and contempt came into her eyes as she recognized Philip's companion. The other woman was Lady Dunluce.

"Why, it is our little water-nymph of the river!" exclaimed the latter. "How are you, Philip? How are you, Miss Ayre?" She looked at Mottisfont with a twinkling eye. "And you, gallant rescuer? Has the Humane Society's medal arrived yet? What a world of surprises!"

"It is nothing to what is coming," replied Philip, laughing. "Have you dined? Sit down at least, and have coffee, Lady Dunluce. Hilda, will you be my guest?"

"Thanks, no," said Miss Detchmere, gazing stonily over the top of Joan's head. "I hardly think I shall dine here again. The mob that frequents the Carlton is becoming rather too mixed for me."

A dark tinge of red flushed Philip's cheek-bones, and his eyes grew hard.

"Lady Dunluce," he said, "you spoke of this lady as Miss Ayre, but we have all made a slight error

there. I think I should present her to you correctly." He turned towards Joan gravely. "Allow me," he said, "to introduce Lady Tallbois of Knayth."

"I beg your pardon?" said Lady Dunluce blankly.

"Known for the present as Miss Joan Tallbois," continued Philip suavely, "but great-niece of the eighth Lord Tallbois and now sole heiress of Knayth. The case comes before the House of Lords shortly. I am retained as counsel."

"My dear Philip!" said Lady Dunluce with an effort, "is such a delightful thing possible, or am I dreaming? Even you would not joke on such a subject. Is she going to win?"

"It is unusual for a barrister to prophesy," said Mottisfont calmly, "but my opinion is she will win."

Hilda Detchmere's face went white as marble. She looked at Joan, first in blank incredulity, then with such inward gust of rage as almost showed through her iron self-control. Slowly she turned her eyes away from the girl, and remained motionless as a statue.

"My dear child!" exclaimed Lady Dunluce, taking hold of Joan's hand and beaming at her, "I cannot tell you how pleased I am. Philip, give me a chair. I would not have missed this for anything. I was right, then!"

"Yes, I'm sure you were," said Philip, laughing, as she seated herself next to Joan; "but what about?"

"Do you remember," said Lady Dunluce quickly to Joan, "I told you on the houseboat you reminded me strangely of someone? But it seemed too absurd to be true then. You are remarkably like poor Alice

Tallbois, whom I used to know at Knayth—she died a year ago. Of course, you never knew her—and yet she was your second cousin. You have unmistakably the Tallbois face. Now tell me all about it. It must be a wonderful story!"

Mottisfont glanced at Joan, and reading consent in her eyes, told Lady Dunluce the facts briefly, but graphically. He was a born weaver of stories. Of Vaille and Bell he said little, but he dwelt on the proofs that he held, and above all on the tale of the Knayth Goblet. Lady Dunluce listened with shining eyes; she had the air of a schoolgirl slowly absorbing a luscious plum.

"Romance! Romance!" she sighed, with intense relish. "I have hunted it in books, on the stage, in cinemas, but it was only a tinselled fraud. And here in the Carlton I find it at last! I am floating among clouds of roses and amber! You wonder-child, you will make all London ring! You, Lady Tallbois of Knayth! Tell me, where are you living now?"

"In Lambeth," laughed Joan.

"Lambeth? Where in the world is that? Come and stay with me in Charles Street. Be my guest until you come into your kingdom. I shall love to have you. I know everyone in London that counts. I will make easy the road for you," said Lady Dunluce benignantly, "until the day when you eclipse me with splendour!"

Joan opened her eyes wide.

"It is charming of you," she said dazedly, "but I cannot. What if I fail—suppose they find, after

all, I am a fraud? All London would laugh at you!"

"Let 'em laugh," said Lady Dunluce; "who cares? I should have had my fun, and I'd only be sorry on your account. You would have had your fun, too." She laid her hand on Joan's. "My dear," she said gently, "do not refuse this. I am a lonely old woman, and I liked you very much from the moment I saw you. You will make me happy by coming."

Philip glanced at Joan.

"You would be in excellent, safe hands," he murmured. "It would be a great relief—to your friends."

"How can I thank you enough," exclaimed Joan, her eyes filling. "I accept gladly, Lady Dunluce."

"Then come tomorrow—tonight, if you like!" cried the kindly old dame.

"Oh, please give me time. And—I cannot break with my friends."

"Bring 'em all to dinner!" said Lady Dunluce impulsively. "The boating-party and the concertina as well—we're a dull lot of people in Charles Street."

All three melted into laughter, and the table was soon the merriest spot in the room. There were, in fact, only three to rejoice. Hilda Detchmere had not waited to hear either the story or the invitation. None of them noticed her departure; she walked down the room towards the entrance, a tigerish bitterness at her heart.

A good-looking young man dining by himself, who had been keeping an unobtrusive watch on Joan's party, rose and smiled as Hilda approached.

"Ah, Mr. Drummond," she said, with a cool nod.

"Have I offended you?" he asked, in slightly

mocking tones. "I thought we were on less formal terms. You did not seem to appreciate the little typist," he added, under his breath.

Hilda started almost imperceptibly, and stared at him. "You know her?" she murmured. "Tell me—" She checked herself and took a seat at the table. "Give me a cigarette, Harold."

Drummond opened a gold case. She selected a cigarette with fingers that trembled slightly.

"Do you know that girl is the claimant to a peerage?" she asked.

"You surprise me," murmured Drummond.

Miss Detchmere looked at him through half-closed eyelids.

"Do I?" she said slowly. "I doubt it. I have never known any information surprise you yet—you are a singularly well-informed person. What do you know of her affairs?"

"Of her peerage, perhaps not very much. But of the girl herself, I know a good deal. The man with her is Mottisfont, the barrister, is it not? Do not think me impertinent, Hilda—but I fancy the girl annoys you," said Drummond softly. "Well, I who am rather well-informed, as you say, may be able to do you a service, if you wish it."

Hilda Detchmere's eyes flashed; she leaned gently towards him.

"Do you mean that?" she said in a whisper.

"Certainly. And I shall require from you a service in return."

"You shall have it, whatever it is," she murmured. "Tell me——"

A slight gesture from Drummond stopped her. The party of three from the other table were passing on their way out. Lady Dunluce took no notice of Hilda Detchmere, whose insolence to Joan had annoyed her, but she bowed to the man.

"Mr. Drummond! How rarely one sees you alone!" she said a little maliciously, as she went by.

"Who was that?" asked Philip, when they reached the vestibule.

"Harold Drummond? A pleasant, idle young dog," said Lady Dunluce carelessly. "His family are neighbours of mine in Cheshire. He seems to do himself pretty well considering how hard up they are. He is always disappearing somewhere—big game shooting, I believe. Well, Joan, won't you change your mind and come to me tonight?"

But Joan excused herself, and thanking them both, promised to see Lady Dunluce next day. She insisted on departing by herself in a taxi, and declined all escort. When Philip had disposed of Lady Dunluce he set out to walk home.

Opening the oak on arriving at his chambers he saw an envelope, unstamped, lying on the mat beneath the letter-slit. Philip picked it up absently, and entering the front room, switched on the light. Joan, her charm, her beauty, the spell of her late presence, gripped his heart and made the blood race in his veins.

"A sweet little girl, if ever there was one," he murmured, "and the greatest match in three kingdoms—if she wins—if she wins!"

His eye fell on the note again. With a little curi-

osity he tore it open and drew out a half-sheet of paper that made him start and stare. On it was printed in capitals a brief message:

HONEST MEN ARE RARE. YOU MAY BE ONE, OR YOU MAY NOT. BUT IF EVER, IN WORD OR DEED, YOU FAIL JOAN TALLBOIS—LOOK TO YOURSELF!

At first Philip was wholly puzzled. Then astonishment turned to wrath. This, surely, was some foolish insolence from the knaves who had tried to hold up the Tallbois evidence. He could think of no other solution.

He reddened with anger. Whatever Philip's qualities, lack of courage was not one. A threat was the last thing to move him. He ripped the message to shreds and tossed it contemptuously into the fire.

CHAPTER XII

MR. SLANEY RESIGNS

"THE problem before us," said Vaille bitterly, "is twofold. In the first place, have we not lost all chance of a great coup for ourselves through Joan Tallbois' inheritance?"

He looked darkly at Callaghan, who sat in the arm-chair, gazing dreamily before him.

"And, secondly," said Mr. Bell, whose face was peculiarly white and shiny, "are not the lives of all five of us in such danger that they can hardly be said to be worth a week's purchase? You know Slim Jim better than I do, Chief."

Mr. Callaghan neatly cut the end from an Havana with a little silver penknife, and peered at his companions over the top of his glasses.

"The answer to both questions," he said, "is in the negative."

He lit the cigar and blew a cloud of smoke with thoughtful appreciation. Mr. Callaghan's Coronas were always in perfect condition.

"Let us shelve, for the moment, the question of danger," he said. "We have been used to danger, any time these ten years. We have skated, now and then, on singularly thin ice. None of us are children

to cry out before we are hurt. We are five—and more—against one.

"It is now four days since the safe was robbed of those documents on which our campaign depended. We have proof that Slim Jim Carey is not dead, but most accursedly alive. Of that there is no doubt. With a skill that no other could command, he has deprived us of the evidence and the documents, on which our campaign was founded. So far from minimising that loss, I confess that it staggered even me. We had to ask ourselves what use Jim Carey would make of those documents, and what was likely to become of them. That question is already solved." Mr. Callaghan paused. "They are in the hands of Philip Mottisfont."

"Are you sure, Chief?" cried Drummond.

"I am telling you what I know. Carey sent him the whole lot—lock, stock, and barrel."

Vaille swore.

"It seems an incredible thing for even Slim Jim to do!" he exclaimed.

"Not at all. It was the natural and common-sense thing for him to do. Carey—I still prefer to call him Carey, and not Tallbois—dared make no use of the proofs himself. Yet his interest is that his daughter should win the Tallbois inheritance, when Slim Jim doubtless intends to help himself. Now, our late leader was a man who invariably kept himself abreast of everything that is going on. He must have learned that this Mottisfont, barrister-at-law, was in touch with Joan, and acting for her. Carey saw his chance at once. He would, I grieve to admit it,

prefer to trust a Temple barrister than—ourselves. I have no doubt he has been shadowing the man. Therefore he checkmates us, as he thinks, by handing over the proofs, anonymously, to Mottisfont, who is now in a position to win the case for the girl."

"But are you guessing at all this, Chief?" exclaimed Vaille.

"Have you ever known me to guess?" replied Mr. Callaghan impatiently. "I trust I have not less common sense than Mr. Carey. Immediately Mottisfont came on the scene and threatened to be troublesome, I took the simple precaution of having him watched. He has a man-servant, Arthur Bridge—not long in his service. It is my experience of bachelor's men-servants that two out of three of them can be bought, if the price is high enough. I approached this man, through a reliable go-between, taking every precaution of course. Bridge was sounded carefully; he proved amenable, and was offered a handsome retaining fee and a still fatter bonus for anything he could overhear between his master and Joan Tallbois, particularly in regard to Joan's claim to a peerage. I am happy to say," added Mr. Callaghan, sipping his port with gusto, "that Bridge has earned his fee very thoroughly.

"In a nutshell, these are the facts. On Thursday last a registered package arrived for Mottisfont, sent from a Strand post-office. Shortly afterwards Joan Tallbois called on Mottisfont and Bridge heard enough of the conversation to be quite certain on two points. First, the package contained legal evidence which Mottisfont was confident would win a case.

Secondly, there was nothing whatever in the package to show where it came from. Mottisfont and the girl talked it over, but they were both completely puzzled. Naturally, they could not possibly guess the secret. Bridge overheard most of what they said."

"Ah!" said Vaille, "this is good indeed. Was Bridge's eavesdropping suspected, by any chance?"

"He very nearly got caught. Mottisfont seems to be a suspicious fellow. However, nothing came of it; Bridge got out of the way deftly, and will be more careful in future. And there, gentlemen, the matter stands. This ineffable Mottisfont holds the key to the situation."

"It would be madness, at this juncture," said Mr. Callaghan, "for us to rob that Mottisfont or his solicitor of the proofs. No. Our line, gentlemen, is to be frank and openly generous." He purred gently over his port.

"What do you mean?"

"Observe," said Mr. Callaghan, "we still hold the bond, and, though it is useless to us now, I still believe the girl will fulfil it faithfully if we play our cards deftly. It is to our interest that she should win her case and become Lady Tallbois. In any case, when she has that enviable position, our second campaign will be opened. My suggestion, gentlemen, is this."

He raised a finger.

"You, Vaille, should write a letter to Philip Mottisfont, which I shall dictate. It will give you the whole credit for the surrender of the evidence. I stake my judgment on that letter."

Vaille opened his eyes wide and whistled.

"It is the only course that remains open to us," persisted Callaghan. "It has its dangers, but it cuts the ground from under our enemies' feet, and puts us right with Joan Tallbois. It cannot be contradicted, and since no one can do that but Jim Carey, who, legally, does not exist, the matter will be in order."

Callaghan paused. "A majority will carry the motion. What do you say, Bell?"

Mr. Bell half closed his eyes, and reflected.

"I say it is masterly!" he declared. "I am wholly in favour of it."

"It may get me into an infernal tangle," objected Vaille, hesitating, "but of course they knew I had the proofs——"

"And you surrender them honourably," beamed Mr. Callaghan. "According yourself the luxury of a clear and unstained conscience, at the same time ensuring victory. Let the other side do the work; we will reap the profits."

"You're right, Chief!" said Vaille. "I agree, and give my vote. You have the master-brain, Chief!"

"I am happy in your approval, gentlemen," said Mr. Callaghan pleasantly. "Success lies not merely in holding high cards, but in playing a bad hand well."

"You do not suggest that we give up our bond?"

"Of course not. We will cut our pound of flesh. Nearest the heart," said Mr. Callaghan with relish. "And there will be no Portia to deny it us. And now let me set your minds at rest regarding Slim Jim,

for I believe we are in no immediate danger from that source, and I do not like to see this nervousness —it is unworthy of you.

"We have been deceived, in common with the Foreign Legion, by one of those intensely inconvenient coincidences which do occur in life—and death—and war. Le Mesurier, alias Tallbois, known to us as Slim Jim, was on the lists of 'killed in action.' Clearly that is wrong. A man disintegrated by a high-explosive shell is, I understand, difficult to identify. Some other victim of the Boche, I suppose, lies in the Argonne under a wooden cross, marked with our former comrade's *nom de guerre.* He is not the only one—it is a thing that constantly happened during that extremely messy war. What really happened to Jim we can only guess. The one thing that matters is that he is alive, and in our midst. Nothing could have been more fortunate for him than to be officially dead, and struck from the records of the police.

"But what follows? Never can he dare declare himself, whatever befall! His neck is forfeit to the Law, for any one of us—particularly Slaney—can instantly connect him with Slim Jim Carey. The sequel will be an arrest, trial, and a hanging, as surely as night follows day."

Mr. Bell nodded.

"Therefore he cannot denounce us. And, doubly, he cannot now make himself known, for his daughter's sake. Neither can we denounce him, for we should all go down together! Hence," said Mr. Callaghan, spreading out his white hands, "a deadlock!"

"Sure enough," said Vaille, "but——"

"What, then, can he do?" pursued Callaghan. "Execute a personal vengeance on some of us, as he threatened? But where, now, is the motive? He believes, you see, that he has defeated us; in robbing us of these documents he has drawn our teeth and rendered us impotent. In a sense, that is true. Consequently, he is likely to let us alone, for the present."

Callaghan rose from his chair.

"Therefore, my friends," he said softly, "now, while he is off his guard as far as we are concerned, and lying low, is the time for us to strike at him!" He tapped Vaille gently on the shoulder. "Already I have set matters in motion for the removal of Slim Jim. And this time there will be no resurrection for him. Trust me for that!" One of Mr. Callaghan's rare smiles exposed his sharp eye-teeth. "I think you will find we are no longer in danger from Jim Carey."

An electric vibrator on the wall buzzed twice faintly. Mr. Callaghan moved to the door, and after listening a moment drew back the bolts and opened it.

The newcomer was Slaney. He stumbled, rather than walked, into the room. His face was livid, a great bruise marked it from temple to jaw. In his eyes was a look of dreadful, beast-like terror; the terror that is seen in the eyes of a hunted animal.

Vaille and Bell looked at him aghast.

"You!" exclaimed Callaghan. "What news, Slaney? Why have you left your post at Knayth?"

"Knayth!" gasped Slaney. "Do you know that devil Carey is alive—alive in spite of all the yarns

you spun us, an' that he's been to Knayth! I've come up against him!"

He looked at the partners and shuddered.

"Ah!" said Vaille, drawing in his breath sharply. "And what—then?"

"Don't ask me!" said Slaney thickly. "I dunno how I gave him the slip—I dunno how it is I'm livin' at this moment. I guess I won't be, unless I get clear away, sharp!"

He seized the decanter, and gulped down the raw brandy.

"I'm done with it! I quit! He knows I put his daughter over to you! It's across the water for me——"

"Slaney!" said Mr. Callaghan sharply.

"Cut it out!" cried the man. "I'm done with your lot, Chief. I'll keep my mouth shut, for you know well I daren't do anything else. But I wouldn't stay by it if you cut the hide off me! It's more'n a man can face!"

He staggered to the door, and they heard him stumbling down the corridor. Drummond made a movement as though to stop him.

"No!" said Callaghan. "Let him go!"

The partners looked at each other. Mr. Bell's face had not much more colour in it than the departed Slaney's. The Chief rose.

"We are rid of a coward," he said quietly. "Slaney has served his turn. Gentlemen, I promise you victory. I accept Jim Carey's challenge!"

CHAPTER XIII

A BOMBSHELL

PHILIP, returning from the Courts of Justice to his chambers, found an official-looking letter awaiting him. When he had opened and read it he gave a slow whistle and smiled grimly.

PHILIP MOTTISFONT,
Barrister-at-Law.

SIR,

Certain evidence having come into my hands concerning the claim of Miss Joan Tallbois to the peerage of Tallbois of Knayth, I learn it is the wish of Miss Tallbois that you should act as her representative and accept brief as her counsel. I understand that some exception was taken by you to my part in this matter.

Under these circumstances, the only course consistent with my honour was to forward all documents to you, that you might take such action as you saw fit. On Thursday last, therefore, I sent all evidence in my possession to you, per registered post. I dispatched these documents anonymously, as I preferred, after what Miss Tallbois said to me, to claim no interest in the matter.

I feel, however, on consideration that I ought to receive formal acknowledgment of these papers having been received by you. Any arrangement which exists is purely between Miss Tallbois and myself. I disclaim

responsibility for the case, and my only wish is for the legal success of Miss Tallbois.

I am, sir,
Yours truly,
NORMAN VAILLE.

"Well, I'm hanged!" said Mottisfont.

He read the note again, his forehead puckered thoughtfully. Then he opened the other letter.

PHILIP MOTTISFONT, Esq.,
155 Bedford Row, W.C.

In re the claim of Miss Joan Tallbois to the estates of Knayth.

SIR,

My client, Mr. Norman Vaille, has taken a course which he has explained to you, and has sent such evidence as he possessed, bearing on above claim. Since Miss Tallbois wishes to retain you as counsel, a course with which I did not agree, I approve Mr. Vaille's action. This is without prejudice to any agreement existing between Mr. Vaille and Miss Tallbois; it is understood that no liability of course attaches to Mr. Vaille for any proceedings you may see fit to initiate.

Yours faithfully,
THEOPHILUS BELL.

Mottisfont threw the letter down.

"There are no limits to this amazing case!" he said. "The deeper we wade into it, the more baffling it becomes!"

He perused the letters carefully, and then, fetching

the Tallbois documents from a heavy strong-room box in his bedroom, examined and compared them carefully for some time. A visitor was announced, an elderly gentleman, grave, florid, and clean-shaven. It was Mr. Langley, head of a firm of solicitors of the highest standing. He had had a long consultation with Philip on the case the previous day.

"Good morning, Mottisfont," he said. "I am punctual, you see, and I hope Miss Tallbois will be, too. I am anxious to meet her. We should, I think, make rapid progress with this affair."

"I expect her every moment," said Philip. "But just look at these two letters, Langley, and tell me what you make of them."

Mr. Langley read the two notes. They amazed him. He frowned deeply, and stared at Mottisfont. Just then the bell rang again, and Joan entered, looking fresh as the morning dew. She shook hands warmly with Philip.

"This is Mr. Langley, who will prepare the case in which I am briefed," said Philip, and Joan bowed charmingly to the solicitor. "Regard him as your strongest ally. But I should like you to see these two bomb-shells that have been dropped on us this morning, Miss Joan."

He handed Joan the letters. She read them, and her face lit up with delight.

"I said that Mr. Vaille might have sent the proofs!" she cried. "And I am only too glad to find it is true. I think we owe him an apology, don't you? Surely you see now he is a man of honour!"

"As a lawyer," said Mr. Langley, "I don't admit

anything so sweeping, Miss Tallbois. Why were they first sent anonymously, and the credit for doing so claimed afterwards? We have only Mr. Vaille's word for it."

"It is a piece of bluff," said Philip contemptuously.

"But if he did not send them, who did?" protested Joan.

"It certainly looks, on the face of it, as if he did send them," said Langley. "And I am quite willing to believe it. It clears the ground, at any rate, and the proofs, I honestly believe, are perfectly genuine."

"One thing I'm very sure of," said Philip grimly. "These documents, which will be in your charge for investigation, Langley, must be secured every night in an impregnable safe-deposit, beyond all possible reach of theft."

"I agree cordially," said Mr. Langley, "though I should not think there is any danger. These letters are very cleverly worded. They are intended to place Mr. Vaille and Mr. Bell on a firm footing. So far they are successful. But I regard it as an impudent attempt to throw the burden of expense on you, while they intend finally to claim under that rash agreement you made, and increase their profit. That they can no longer do, however. You are free of them from this moment."

"How?"

"We shall send a formal acknowledgment of these letters, but I will be no party to acknowledging their absurd claim. When you have your estate, Miss Tallbois, you may, if you like, send Mr. Vaille whatever small honorarium you feel his alleged documents

are worth—say, a few hundreds. He has no right to expect anything."

"And I," said Joan, "tell you that I am more determined than ever to fulfil my contract. Without Mr. Vaille's evidence I should never have had a claim. He now entrusts it all to me, and leaves the rest to my sense of honour. I shall certainly pay in full."

Mr. Langley sighed. He had had a long experience of the ways of lady clients, and was only sure that he never understood them.

"It is a strange business, certainly—these letters," said Joan. "But many strange things have happened to me—since I drank from the Knayth Goblet."

Mr. Langley smiled drily. He had heard the story, and it left him cold. His mind was not of the romantic order. Philip, however, looked at Joan keenly.

"Tell me," he said, "do you remember anything else unusual that happened to you on that day when you were at Knayth? I have a reason for asking."

A shadow passed over Joan's face, as though an ugly memory were awakened.

"I have hardly thought of it since," she said, "but it seemed to me that when I was at Knayth I saw a face looking at me through the window—an evil, unpleasant face, and I felt so strange and faint that I let the steward give me wine—in the Goblet."

"A face? Whose?" said Philip. "A man's or a woman's? Was it a face that you knew? What did you think it meant?"

"I cannot tell. Very possibly it was only fancy.

I was feeling faint and weak that morning; I expect I imagined it."

"You have not seen it since?"

"No."

Mr. Langley looked impatient. But Mottisfont persisted.

"Can you think of anything that occurred to you that day, Miss Joan. Never mind how trifling it seems to you—tell us about it."

"No," said Joan, "I don't think so. Except a tramp I met—or rather he followed me, and spoke to me."

"Indeed? When, and where?"

"On my way back from Knayth," she began. "He came—" Joan paused suddenly and checked herself. A strong, unsought instinct seemed to stir in her, a silent warning, which she could not in the least explain. It was as though a quiet voice were at her ear, bidding her be silent. After all, why should she say anything about the courtly tramp to these two lawyers? He could be no concern of theirs, and she was only wasting time.

"Oh, it was just a beggar, who asked alms of me," she said, indifferently. "I gave him sixpence and he went on his way."

Philip shrugged his shoulders.

"Nothing very unusual about that," said Mr. Langley, drily.

"Possibly not," said Philip slowly. "Let us get on with these documents. They, at least, are real."

Mottisfont and Langley settled down to the documents with a business-like air, as if glad to get away

from vagueness and mystery. They asked Joan an infinity of questions, making notes of everything she was able to tell them, and after two hours of this, Joan was fairly exhausted, and Mr. Langley expressed himself extremely well satisfied.

"It is not my habit to be as enthusiastic as our young friend here," he said to Joan, tapping Philip on the shoulder, "but I see every hope of an early and successful issue, Miss Tallbois. Already, though we have only been at work seven days, several of the necessary witnesses have been found. Some are in England, as it happens, and the others are communicated with. Mottisfont has been immensely energetic."

"But who is paying for all this!" exclaimed Joan, with sudden suspicion. "I have no agreement with you about that."

"My dear madam," said Mr. Langley severely, "you will be good enough to wait until you receive my taxed bill of costs and expenses, which I shall deliver to you at the proper time and in the proper form!"

Joan felt crushed.

"Quite right, Miss Joan," said Philip, laughing. "Never harass your legal advisers. Mr. Langley is as mild as milk till he's interfered with—then he becomes formidable."

"And you," said Joan. "I think you are formidable too!"

"On the contrary," answered Philip, smiling, "great ladies can command poor barristers."

"Ah! don't make fun of me," said Joan a little piteously.

"It is the last thing in my mind. I shall work heart and soul for you. And I have a piece of good news. You wished to learn more about your father?"

"Above all things!"

"Well, one of our most important witnesses is the ship's captain who saved his life—knowing no more than the dead, of course, who it was that he saved. These papers," said Philip, "have enabled us to trace that excellent sea-dog. I have already had an interview with him and expect him here at any moment. On him our case largely depends. And that sounds like his powerful footstep at the door."

The bell rang, and Mottisfont's servant showed in a large and amply-bearded gentleman of mature years.

"Miss Joan," said Mottisfont, with a twinkle in his eye, "let me introduce you to the man who saved your father from the sea."

Joan, her bosom heaving quickly, turned to face the rough-looking man with the wrinkled features, who stood turning his hat round and round in his embarrassment.

"Captain Grier, Miss, at your service," he said huskily. "An' proud to be of any use to you."

"That's a mild way of putting it," said Mottisfont. "Of course if it had not been for the captain here, there would be no Tallbois Claimant Case today, and I should have missed the most interesting client I ever had."

With an impulsive gesture Joan took the old seaman's rough hands in hers.

"How can I ever thank you?" she said in a low

voice. "It is foolish to speak of thanks for such a service as yours." There were tears in her eyes as she spoke. The beauty and charm of the girl completely overcame the ancient mariner; he looked at her with awe, and the hundred wrinkles on his face turned a rich plum colour.

"Well, that repays me over an' over," he stammered, "an' I didn't know no more than the dead who it was I picked up. If I had——"

"Tell me about it!" cried Joan eagerly. "Tell me about my father. You can guess how wonderful a story it is to me!"

"Well, Miss—I mean ma'am—that's to say, my lady," replied Grier confusedly. "I've heard the rest of it from Mr. Mottisfont here, he's got my yarn down in writing, an' I must say his part o' the story knocks mine into a cocked hat, savin' your presence. It caps anything I've heard in all my going to sea; an' I've seen some queer things, too. What I can tell you ain't much. It was on the first January, 1898, forty miles sou'-sou' east of Key West, at six bells in the forenoon watch, we sighted a man lashed to a driftin' spar, got him aboard, thought he was dead at first, but, after a long job, we brought him round. A fine lookin' young fellow he was—not much more'n a boy. When he could speak he asks, 'Where am I?'

"'On the S.S. *Carrickmore*,' I says. 'You was pretty nigh dead, but you're safe now; an' you're goin' to live.' I remember his answer, I do, as if 'twas yesterday."

"What was it?" asked Joan quickly.

"'So much the worse for me,' he says, an' then he went off to sleep, an' slept seven hours. He was a tough 'un—the sort you can't kill, an' built like a greyhound. When he'd got up an' had a meal, he was as fit as a tiger, an' he half-killed my mulatto cook—a fourteen-stone terror—for givin' him sauce. An' though he was only dressed in a suit of greasy dungarees the carpenter lent him, he held himself like a king. He thanked me, uncommon polite. When we was bringing him round I saw a tattoo-mark on his left arm—a blue dragon, with a couple of words under it that looked like gibberish—I reckoned they was Eyetalian. A funny lookin' dragon it was—the sort of thing a man might see after a long spell at the rum barrel, savin' your presence."

"Like this?" said Mottisfont, smiling, as he laid on the table an impression of the Tallbois crest and motto—a fierce-looking heraldic wyvern, with the inscription "Semper Vigilans."

"The very thing!" nodded the skipper. "What does them words mean, sir?"

"One might translate them freely—'I am always on the watch,'" replied Mottisfont with a laugh.

"I should say it suited him," said the skipper. "He'd a pair of eyes that didn't miss much. I can't say he brought me much luck," added Grier sorrowfully, "for the *Carrickmore* piled herself up next day an' became a total wreck—a thing that never happened to me before. We all got ashore, an' I never saw that passenger again. To think that he'd be a lord if he was livin' now! As for me, I lost my job,

though it was no fault of mine, an' luckily havin' a little saved, I gave up the sea."

"One thing I promise you upon my honour," said Joan emotionally, taking the skipper's hand in hers again. "You shall never lack a friend, Captain Grier, while I live; and you shall be no loser when I come into my own."

"In the meantime," said Philip drily, "hold yourself in readiness, Mr. Grier, to give your evidence before the courts, for it will very soon be required now. Keep yourself daily in touch with me."

The skipper nodded, and made his farewells. When he had gone, Philip turned to Joan.

"I have something else here to show you," he said. "The French Army record of Sergeant Le Mesurier, of the Foreign Legion. A full description and all identity marks—including a blue tattooed wyvern on the left arm, with motto 'Semper Vigilans.' The record also shows that he was awarded the Croix de Guerre for gallantry in action, and twice afterwards the bronze star to it."

Joan's eyes grew misty as she looked at these relics of her dead father.

"Our case," continued Philip, "is now all but completed. Application has been made, and on the arrival of the American witnesses it will proceed forthwith. For we now have the statement of your late guardian, Janet Mackellar, that she left in trust for you, and it clinches the case even better than I could have hoped. Failure is now impossible. Mr. Langley has it."

Langley, who throughout had been sitting silent

at the desk by the window, grave and rather disapproving, came forward with a paper.

"This is a copy," said Philip, taking it; "the original remains with the Public Trustee." He looked at Joan and hesitated. "I fear," he added gently, "that this letter of Janet Mackellar's may cause you pain, and perhaps it would be better for you to remain ignorant of its contents. There is no real necessity, Miss Joan, for you to read it if you prefer not."

"No matter," said Joan instantly and with decision. "Give it me."

She took the paper, and as she read it, a strange thrill, a sense of darkness and danger, crept over her through this message from the dead.

My Dearest Little Joan,—

When this at last is placed in your hands the little money I had to leave you will be yours, and I think you will then need it more than you do now. For I have a feeling that trouble will come upon you with the years. And I know I am near my end. But I have a confession to make.

Your name is not Ayre. That is a name I gave to you myself, for good reasons, when you were still too young to remember any other.

You are the daughter of Helen Lloyd and William Travers Tallbois, Englishman, who married your mother at Calcraft, South Georgia, in 1898. Your mother died and confided you to my care. I have tried to justify that trust, and I loved you as I have never loved any other living creature. You were the brightest ray in my life.

Your father never again used his true name, for he

dared not use it, nor ever openly claimed you as his daughter. He knew where you were, and he agreed with the course I had chosen. He came sometimes to see you. He was the man you knew as "Uncle Jim."

I believe your father is now dead. It is not for me to speak ill of the dead. I knew but a little of William Tallbois' life, and what I know I shall not tell you, even now. I will only say that it was evil and wicked.

I confess that I hated William Tallbois. I hated to see him with you. I dreaded his influence over your future. I did my utmost to separate his life from yours. In the end, I fled with you, in the hope of escaping from him for ever.

How far this was due to my jealousy of him and my love for you, I do not know. If I have sinned, I pray for forgiveness, where alone forgiveness should be sought.

I could not tell you all this while I lived, for fear that you should turn against me and hate me. I should wish to keep the secret from you for all time. But I dare not take so much upon me. You have the right to know, and to choose your way of life, and your name.

Don't think too hardly of me, little Joan. Try and forgive a hard, dour old woman who guarded you and loved you.

But take this solemn warning from the dead, and remember I speak from knowledge. Keep the name of Ayre. Never seek to solve the secret of the other, nor to claim it for your own. For so it will be better for your life, for your happiness—and for your soul.

JANET MACKELLAR.

CHAPTER XIV

EMMIE LOOKS AHEAD

JOAN stood in the squalid little top-floor room in Lambeth and looked about her with mingled feelings. How curiously mean and unattractive the place seemed now. For many weeks past Joan had been installed at Charles Street as the guest of Lady Dunluce. Already she felt as perfectly at home there as if Mayfair had always been her abode. Her hostess was both considerate and charming. She could not make enough of Joan. The careless, comfort-surrounded life of the well-to-do had been wrapped about the girl like a cloak. There had been dinners and little dances; small parties of happy, easy-mannered folk, and Joan had made many acquaintances among those who formerly had been no more than names to her. The Tallbois Claimant, endorsed socially by so influential and sporting a dame as Joan's hostess, became a social celebrity. And the uncertainty of the affair made it all the more piquant for those who sought her acquaintance.

And now Joan, for an hour, found herself back in Lambeth. What a difference there was between the two places, and how sordid appeared the dinginess of the bed-sitting-room the girl friends had shared. Yet a curious regret tinged Joan's feelings. Before life

became so gilded and wonderful a thing, she had been very happy there with red-headed little Emmie Clegg.

Of Emmie she had seen nothing whatever for nearly a fortnight—not, indeed, since the day following Joan's change of fortune. All she had had was a letter from Emmie to say that her uncle, the market gardener at Clievemead, was ill, and that she had leave from Puttock & Copes to go down and nurse him. Since then, not a word.

Joan, in fact, had returned in the hope of finding fresh news of Emmie; not with the idea of bringing anything away from the place. There was nothing in that dismal room that she needed. She had sent to the agent and paid the rent of the room for two quarters in advance. There were no letters; no sign of her friend. But, at that moment, as Joan stood by the broken table, reflecting, she heard a well-remembered step on the stair.

The door opened, and Emmie Clegg appeared—dressed from head to foot in sombre, tight-fitting black, that heightened the effect of her freckled white skin and flaming red hair. She stopped in amazement on seeing Joan, who the next moment had her in her arms and kissed her fondly.

"Emmie!"

"Joan!" gasped Emmie. And then she freed herself and stepped back.

"S'pose I ought to say 'my lady,'" she remarked drily.

"For goodness' sake don't let us talk nonsense! Never mind all that. What is wrong, Emmie?" said Joan anxiously. "You are in mourning!"

"Poor old Uncle Ben," said Emmie in melancholy accents. "Been nursing him; no one else there fit to do it." She coughed huskily. "No good. Buried him yesterday."

Joan felt a pang of sorrow. She remembered too well the kindly, simple old man who had been her host and Emmie's on that wonderful Bank Holiday week-end at Clievemead.

"Emmie! What can I say. I am so sorry——"

"Can't be helped. All got to go the same way," said Emmie, shaking her head. "Don't let's talk about it. He was a decent old sort. May we all be as fit to go as he was. It's you I want to talk about. What's all this wonderful tale about you an' your title an' money? Is it *true*, Joan? For all *I've* heard of it is—what I've seen in the papers."

"You would have been the very first to know, Emmie, if you'd been here," said Joan, flushing. "But at the first I was bound to secrecy about it, and that day when I left the office for good, I only dared tell you——"

"Yes, yes—I quite understand that. But let's hear about it, Joan."

She sat down, and, breathless, listened to the whole story as Joan poured it out.

"It's a fairy tale!" exclaimed Emmie. "It's like what you see in a play. An' yet, the way you tell it—it all sounds simple an' reasonable enough." She rose and stared at Joan. "You, a lady of title—a millionairess—a swell!" she concluded bitterly.

"Emmie, why do you call me these things?" said the girl quietly. "I am just Joan. That's all!"

"That's it. Just Joan. True enough! There'll be one in that push, anyhow, that's clean and straight. May they never spoil you, Joan! Don't think me hard because I hate the whole crew o' them, men an' women, too. I've better cause than ever you'll know, an' don't think I'm not glad for you, little Joan. I'm as glad as it's my nature to be. I'd give one o' my hands to see you happy." She stared at Joan. "But what are you doin'—stayin' here alone?"

Joan told her of Lady Dunluce's hospitality.

"Oh," said Emmie drily. "Lady Dunluce, eh? An' what's the next move, Joan?"

"I don't know or care," said Joan stepping forward and seizing her by the hands. "What I want of you is this, Emmie. The day I come into my own, I want you to come and live with me for always, and be my friend—you, the only little friend I ever had. We've always shared alike when there was little enough to share. Now there's plenty, you must stand by me."

"In other words, drop my job and come an' sponge on you," retorted Emmie, shaking her head.

"Then come and run Knayth for me, and the London house, and call it your job!" said Joan desperately. "Call yourself my companion, if you like. Only come and be my friend!"

"Ah!" said Emmie, standing back and looking at her curiously. "An' the funny thing is, you mean it!"

"Of course I mean it!"

"Just so, it wouldn't be you if you didn't. You'd take me in there, among all your swells, an' never be ashamed of me a minute. Me!" Emmie extended

her arms, as if to display her squat figure and quaint features. "Well, it's no go, my girl. I'm not goin' to queer your pitch like that. Besides, you've got your life to live—an' I've got mine."

"But Emmie——"

"Wait! Now be careful what you say, although I'm not goin' to live with you. I'm sure you're not going to insult me by offering me any of your money, Joan. For if you did it'd be the absolute finish between you an' me."

Joan's hands dropped to her sides with a gesture of despair.

"I'd like to shake you, Emmie!" she said with intense feeling.

"You aren't big enough. Never mind all that rot about money, old gal. I've a stronger will than you have. Besides, I'm rich myself. I've had a surprise, same as you. I'm down in Uncle Ben's will for £500."

"Emmie! But that's splendid! I am glad, dear!"

"Five hundred Jimmy o' Goblins." Emmie put a handkerchief to her eyes and brushed away a small tear. "I was fond of the old chap; he's always been very good to me. But there it is. After I've worn this black a bit me an' my Ted is goin' to get married. He's got a bit saved, too, an' we've got our eye on a shop. We shall make good all right. I'm goin' to be happy with my Ted. He's a Man!"

Joan kissed her warmly.

"You'll both be happy, dear. The best news yet. Emmie, I claim to be your bridesmaid!"

"We'll be pleased, my Ted an' me," said Emmie, grinning, "to welcome Lady Tallbois of Knayth.

'Weddin' at the Little Church Round the Corner. Reception in the Old Kent Road. Other papers please copy.' But look here, Joan—about you? Sure you've got a certainty? No chance of your bein' beaten on the post? When's the show start?"

"It's begun now. The case is before the House of Lords. It may take a long while, but they tell me I can't fail."

"Ah! An' who's got the reins? Who's runnin' it for you?"

"Why, Mr. Philip Mottisfont. Didn't you know?"

"Him!" Emmie's voice rose sharply, and her face became grim. "What, has he got the job? Shoved himself in, did he?"

"He is my Counsel, Emmie. It was I who chose him. He has been splendid—I owe him everything."

"Mottisfont!" Emmie's tone was like a rasp of a file on metal. "He's doin' it for you, is he?" She started up, and her fingers gripped Joan's arm. "I didn't envy you before, Joan. But I do now! I do now! I'd give a year's work to be in your place soon—just for one day!"

"What do you mean?" said Joan, amazed.

"Mean!" snarled Emmie. "I mean that he'll ask you to marry him! Yes, I'd give all I've got, when that happens, to be Lady Tallbois of Knayth. D'ye know what my answer'd be?"

Joan, rather pale, stared in amazement.

"'You dog!' I'd say"—Emmie's voice hissed between her teeth—"'when I was a workin' girl on two quid a week, you thought I was dirt under foot. There'd ha' been no talk of marriage! You'd take

all I had, an' give nothin'. Now I've a title an' a million of money, you come crawling at my heels. That's my answer to you, Mister Main-Chance Mottisfont!' An I'd drop me hand across his lyin' mouth!"

Emmie made a swift sweep with her arm, like a back-handed blow. Joan was deadly white.

"Emmie!" she cried trembling. "How dare you say these things to me——"

"Dare! I dare more than that. Has he asked you yet?"

"No!"

"No! He's waitin' to be sure you're a winner!"

Emmie looked at her friend, who stared back at her with pale cheeks and blazing eyes.

"I s'pose," said Emmie in an altered voice, "I've done for myself—with you. You won't forgive me. But remember, if ever you want a friend, come to me. I can right you."

Suddenly she threw an arm round Joan's neck, pressed a fierce kiss on her forehead, and flung out of the room without another word. Her footsteps were heard rapidly retreating down the staircase.

Joan sank into a chair, and sat for some time, trembling and staring before her.

"Is it true?" she muttered. "Is it true?"

She leaned upon the table and covered her face with her hands.

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On the stroke of noon several weeks later, Joan Tallbois stepped towards Lady Dunluce's car that

was waiting before the House of Lords. As she came through the entrance gates, a Press camera clicked suggestively. There was a stir among the knot of people assembled. Another camera opened fire, and yet another.

Lady Dunluce pressed Joan's arm.

"How thrilling!" she whispered. "At last I shall have my portrait in the *Mirror*. Front page, with any luck. For years I have dreamed of this. You treasure; how can I ever be thankful enough for having met you!"

Joan laughed merrily. Her hostess was a perpetual delight to her. Nothing would satisfy Lady Dunluce but to be present at the Inquiry.

It was the sixth day of the Tallbois Peerage Case, yet this was the first time that Joan herself had been required to attend in person. The whole affair was utterly unlike anything she expected.

The morning sitting was over, and Joan waited in the car for Mottisfont, whom she had left in the court-room. While she waited, a man passed the car and raised his hat to her gravely. It was Vaille. Joan responded with an almost imperceptible bow. She had noticed him sitting silently in the gallery of the court-house, throughout the case.

"Who's that?" whispered Lady Dunluce.

"An acquaintance of mine," said Joan quietly. And the next moment her eyes lit up, for Philip Mottisfont appeared.

"All over for today," he said, entering the car.

"Thank Heaven!" exclaimed Lady Dunluce. "Another ten minutes and I should have got up and

screamed, or thrown something at the judges. Let us have lunch, for goodness' sake!"

Joan and Philip laughed. They drove to a restaurant near by. Lady Dunluce drew off her gloves and tossed them on the table.

"Philip, you are the biggest fraud in London," she said.

"How so?" chuckled Philip.

"Man alive! I came here expecting excitement—romance—sensation! This, the famous Tallbois Claimant Case? A Parish Council or a Sunday-School meeting would be thrilling compared with it."

"My dear lady," said Philip, "there's nothing duller than a peerage claim, for the spectators. You see, luckily for Miss Joan, there is no rival claimant. All we have to do is to prove who Miss Joan is, and who her parents were—and there you are. It's a tougher job than you think, for any one of a hundred things could upset it. I know there's a wonderful story in it, but the arguments in court are always tedious, and all the witnesses have been examined. It's a curious case," he added more seriously, "and I only hope, in the future, we shan't find a flood of 'romance' in it as would satisfy even Lady Dunluce. But it won't happen in the House of Lords' Committee-room."

"Tell me one thing, Philip," said Lady Dunluce, peremptorily. "I wish to know, with certainty, or at any rate within a day or two, when Joan's case will be settled and finished, one way or the other. Assuming that she wins, when will it be made known?"

"Yes, I can tell you that," he answered. "To-morrow Joan herself will be called to give her own evidence, which will not take long, for only a little of it bears on the case. Two days after that will wind up the whole thing. Judgment will be reserved and the court's decision be given out and made public, by next Friday at the latest. I count on that."

"Good," said Lady Dunluce. "My cards will go out today for my biggest party of the year—it shall be held next Friday! I will have all London there—though it burst the walls of my house. To celebrate your victory, Joan. We will have the whole of this thing that calls itself Society—to meet Lady Tallbois of Knayth! So it shall be on the cards."

Mottisfont smiled, but Joan looked aghast.

"But if I lose?" she said, rather pale, as she looked at her hostess. "What a fearful crash for you, Lady Dunluce. It will cost you your position—London will never forgive you. Think of it!"

"And think of my triumph if you win," replied Lady Dunluce, her eyes shining proudly. "'Behold!' they will say, 'this extraordinary old woman is infallible.' If it were my life as well as my reputation I would stake it on such a throw as this. Have no fear, Joan, you shall come into your own, amid the thunder of the captains and the shouting!"

Joan sat back with a somewhat tremulous laugh. It was useless to say more. She had realized what a hold the gambling spirit had over this remarkable old lady and all her set. It was as though Joan were a strong Derby favourite.

"Well," she said, with a sigh, "if I am left at the post, Lady Dunluce, I shall have to go back to my typewriter."

"You will win," said Philip quietly.

"We are riding on a wave of victory," said Lady Dunluce, "and it's a big triumph for you, Philip, this case. I suppose you will 'take silk' now, or whatever they call it?"

"Take silk? I took it today," said Philip smiling. "After a good deal of hesitation, I accepted. I am now a K.C."

"King's Counsel? How splendid!" said Joan eagerly. "I expect you might have had it long ago. Why on earth should you hesitate?"

"Well, of course, it is the road to honours—a step up the ladder," replied Mottisfont, "but, oddly enough, for a young barrister with a big practice it often means making a good deal less money when he becomes a King's Counsel." He paused. "However," added Mottisfont quietly, "money will not matter so much now. So I accepted."

"Let us go," said Lady Dunluce, rising abruptly, "I must arrange my party. If we are to congratulate you on your silk, Philip, we shall soon have a much warmer congratulation to offer Joan. Come along!"

They left the restaurant together.

Norman Vaille, who had been sitting at a corner table watching the three for some time past, followed them out with his eyes. He turned to Mr. Theophilus Bell, who sat beside him.

"Did you watch Mottisfont with the girl?" said Vaille slowly. "I perceive a new haughtiness in the

little fool's manner, now she believes herself certain of a great future. But she is in love with him, and he knows it. He will ask her to marry him—if he has not already done so."

Mr. Bell permitted himself an oily chuckle.

"Not he!" he replied. "He will postpone that question till the court has given its decision. For even Mottisfont knows there is no certainty in law cases. But if he wins, there is no doubt about her answer."

"And if anything should go wrong with the Tallbois peerage?" sniggered Vaille, "after she has it?"

Mr. Bell permitted himself an unctuous chuckle.

"Why then Mr. Mottisfont, K.C., will back out again with the greatest skill and coolness. Our pathetic Joan will find herself doubly left in the cart."

Vaille rose and flicked a crumb from his sleeve.

"It seems," he said suavely, "that Lady Tallbois of Knayth is not quite such a fortunate person as the public appears to believe, eh, Bell?"

CHAPTER XV

THE GREAT QUESTION

THE TALLBOIS CLAIMANT WINS
LADY TALLBOIS OF KNAYTH
HOUSE OF LORDS' DECISION

JOAN, sitting on the long sofa in Lady Dunluce's drawing-room, let the newspaper slip from her fingers, and gave herself up to a whirl of mingled thoughts. It was a wonderland that had opened up before her.

The news had reached her privately, several hours before, and the paper with its big headlines could tell her nothing new. But the effect of that triumph still lingered. The splendour of it still dazed her. At last doubt, uncertainty, and peril were all swept away. She was the owner of millions, and a great name. The seal of the nation's highest court of appeal was set upon her heritage.

The door opened and Lady Dunluce came in like a large and benevolent whirlwind. Her eyes were shining. She seized Joan by the wrists and pulled her to her feet.

"Isn't it superb!" she cried. "Welcome, my lady viscountess! Welcome, little Joan!"

"It's glorious!" gasped Joan. "And I think I'm more glad on your account even than on my own."

Lady Dunluce laughed happily.

"What a triumph for me now, though!" she said; "what a reception there will be for you tonight, Joan. And had it failed, there would have been not one soul here. Right at the eleventh hour we succeed. I love a close thing like that. Upon my word, though, Philip ran it fine!"

"He said today was the latest possible."

"And he was right," laughed Lady Dunluce. "Who says Friday is an unlucky day now?"

"Friday? So it is!"

"And the thirteenth of the month at that. It must be a lucky day for your family, Joan. London will remember it. Mind, you've got to be here for my guests tonight. No running away!"

"You need not fear," laughed Joan. "I shall stay and face the music. I am looking forward to it. I won't fail you."

Lady Dunluce looked at her approvingly.

"You're a thoroughbred, Joan; Tallbois blood, bone, and brain. You will always hold your own. From today you take your place."

"Aren't we forgetting Mr. Mottisfont? It is a triumph for him too, isn't it? Where should I have been without him?"

"Ah, Philip. Yes." Lady Dunluce sat down on the sofa beside Joan, and looked at her anxiously, with a new seriousness. "Tell me, Joan, do you care for Philip?"

Joan coloured very slightly. She looked at her interrogator, but made no answer. Lady Dunluce saw the girl did not care to reply.

"There are better men than Philip Mottisfont, Joan," said Lady Dunluce quietly. The girl suddenly looked straight at her.

"Better? Richer, you mean? Greater social position?"

"No. Not only that. I said better." The old lady paused. "A clever boy, Philip. A brilliant, charming fellow. A favourite of mine, but hard as a diamond. And more than that——"

She rose and looked strangely at Joan. Then taking the girl's face between her hands, kissed her gravely on the forehead.

"Think well, Joan," she said very quietly. "Think twice——"

Lady Dunluce turned without another word and left the room.

Joan rose and walked to the window. At first she had felt indignant, then puzzled, and now anxious and uneasy. She was at a loss to know what to make of it all. Then sitting in the window-seat, she rested her chin on her hand and communed with herself, her heart beating fast.

Would Philip ask her to marry him? Often of late, he had seemed strangely cold and formal. Did he think there was a barrier between them now—or was there another reason? Joan had no doubt what her answer would be. She loved him with her whole heart and soul. A love that would be the more loyal to Philip even if his fortunes were broken and all the world were against him.

But his love for her—what was it? Would it stand a test? If he ever meant to ask her, why had he not

done so when her own fortune still hung in the balance? It would have come far better from him then.

Doubts and a chilling fear crept about her heart. She remembered the strange, fierce things that Emmie had said. And in a moment a keen determination came into Joan's mind. Her hands clenched. If ever Philip asked her to be his wife there would be no easy reply. She would question him.

There were many things she had to ask of him. And she would require his answer to each. Joan's lips tightened to a firm line.

"It is my due!" she whispered, "and I will have his answer before I give him mine."

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As early as half-past nine, car after car set down its occupants in Charles Strect, and already Lady Dunluce's reception-rooms were thronged with "the people who matter." Soon the little house, brilliant with lights and flowers, was packed to overflowing. Cabinet Ministers were there; there was at least two ambassadors. All London flocked to meet the little lady whose romantic rise to a great position was on every tongue.

Joan, in a pale amber frock that set off her vivid beauty superbly, was overwhelmed with a flood of congratulations. Her cheeks were slightly flushed, there was a charm in the girlish pleasure sparkling from her eyes, that won all hearts. Her loveliness amazed those who for the first time met her.

"Lord, what a prize for some lucky beast!" murmured an immaculate young guardsman enviously

to a companion. "An angel, a peeress, and a millionaire."

Another smartly groomed young man, whom Joan had already met two or three times, and who seemed to go everywhere, came up and congratulated her very charmingly. He added that he hoped she would not cut her humble former acquaintances.

"I think not, Mr. Drummond," said Joan smiling. "I wonder how many of them would have cut me, if I had failed?"

"Don't be cynical," said Drummond; "it is early for that yet."

Joan was about to answer when she caught sight of another face she knew. It was Hilda Detchmere, magnificent in a gown of soft crimson, with a necklace of rubies. It astonished Joan that she should be there at all. Joan was not aware that the Hon. Hilda Detchmere was a cousin of Lady Dunluce's, and for the matter of that she had come without an invitation at all. And at that moment, to Joan's still greater surprise, Hilda came right up to the girl, easily and confidently.

"Lady Tallbois," she said with a smile, holding out her hand, "may I add my little felicitations on this happy day?"

Here was an opportunity for a revenge such as seldom falls to a woman's lot. It was amazing that the girl laid herself open to it, after the bitter insolence and sneers she had formerly bestowed on Joan. And yet Joan did not avail herself of the chance. She looked Hilda Detchmere straight in the eyes for a moment, and then smiled and took the outstretched hand.

"Thank you, Miss Detchmere," she said gently.

Hilda Detchmere replied with a pressure of her fingers and a few courteous, well-chosen words, and left Joan with a feeling of relief. She moved to the other end of the room, and Drummond joined her.

"Well," murmured Drummond smiling, "for an inborn and astounding talent for acting, give me women in general, and you in particular, Hilda! You hate that little ex-typist like poison. Yet you were meek and sweet as honey to her, and actually induced her to be gracious! I expected her to reply with a public snub that would have flattened you out. What made you risk it?"

Hilda sat down on a settee and made room for Drummond beside her. She looked at him through half-closed eyelids as she replied.

"I had my reasons, Harold. It is easier to get home at a person one hates, if one keeps on good terms with her. And Lady Tallbois is a power to be reckoned with now. Besides, it is possible you are mistaken about her."

Drummond leaned forward and lowered his voice.

"About one thing, at least, I am not mistaken," he said. "Within a week—or much less—the excellent Mottisfont, K.C., will ask her to be his wife. And he is expected here tonight."

A look came into Hilda Detchmere's eyes that startled even Drummond.

"If this were true," she whispered, "there is no weapon that I would not use against that girl—no measure that I would not take. Can you prove it to me?"

"Assuredly I will prove it to you."

"We understand each other, I think, without explanations," said Hilda. "You said, a little while ago, that you could help me?"

"I can, and will—at a price. For, believe me, I have the power. Look, Hilda—here comes the man himself."

Philip Mottisfont came in by the farther entrance. He was a little pale, but even in that brilliant assembly there was no man who looked so distinguished. He caught Joan's eye, and came across to her at once.

"At last!" she said, her eyes brightening as she gave him her hand; "I was wondering why you were not here."

"I was busy to the last," he said simply. It was Joan's interests that had kept him. At that moment the violins in the gallery struck into a swift, lilting measure. "Am I too late, or will you dance with me —Lady Tallbois?"

"With my champion? Surely!" said Joan. The next moment she and Philip were swinging down the room in each other's arms, among the first half-dozen couples to start. Their steps suited perfectly. So striking was the appearance of the pair—the vividly beautiful girl in the first flush of her triumph, the strong, cold features of the man, pale and showing the marks of hard work and anxiety—that many people turned to watch. In more than one quarter there were murmurs of admiration.

A white-haired peer, however, himself a man of millions, leaning against the wall, looked at Philip

as the young barrister steered Joan past him, and his brows knitted.

"Dashed fortune-hunter!" the elder man muttered. "Will he have the impudence, I wonder? He starts with a pull in the weights."

Joan, as the music quickened, gave herself up wholly to the delight of the moment. Philip, a masterly dancer, guided her where he wished. The thrill of his presence, the strong, easy support of his arm, made her feel as though she were in dreamland.

Philip himself seemed cold and restrained. He spoke little. But he became conscious that his partner was flagging slightly, as though the excitement of the evening had told on her. He slowed and stopped.

"Shall we rest?" he said. "I must not tire you."

Joan assented silently. Mottisfont guided her away from the thronged reception-rooms and the crowd, to a long apartment that was curtained off from the landing. It was empty, save for two chairs, many flowers, and a soft glow of electric bulbs.

"A wonderful evening for you," said Philip, as Joan took one of the chairs.

"Yes," she said softly, "the dream that came true!"

He seated himself, but did not look at her. There was a strained expression in his eyes, and his face was paler still.

"Well," he said quietly, "our business relations are ended. I wonder, shall we see as much of each other in the future, Lady Tallbois?"

"How funny that sounds," said Joan.

"Are you not used to your new honours yet?" he answered, smiling.

"I mean, from you," said Joan. "Somehow I think I like the old way best. What do you mean by saying we shall see little of each other? We belong, I think, to the same world now."

"It is a world that lies at your feet," he answered. "But I—I am a worker, a busy man. There is a difference now, and a great one. I have neither the leisure nor the power that are at your command."

"I believe," said Joan steadily, "that we shall see each other, Mr. Mottisfont, oftener than you suppose. Why not?"

"Thank you. It is good of you to say that."

"I do not understand," said Joan. She looked at him, and their eyes met. Into Philip's came an eager, burning light. His reserve fell from him like a mask. He caught her hands in his.

"Joan!" he said, bending close to her, "I do not know if I have the right to say this. God knows I have tried to keep it unsaid. But I love you, Joan! Dear little Joan, I love you so! Tell me, can you care for me? Will you be my wife?"

There was a tense silence. Joan rose to her feet, looking straight before her, her heart beating wildly. Gone, as though swept away by a storm-wind, were all her resolutions—every question to which she demanded an answer was blotted from her mind. She turned with a sob and sank into Philip's arms, her soul upon the lips that she raised to his.

"I love you, Philip. Take me, for there is only you in all the world!"

"My darling!" He held her to him, and kissed her fiercely. "Joan, this is more than I dared to hope. You love me, my little Joan?"

"If this had not come to me," she whispered, "all the rest were less than nothing." She looked up into his eyes. "Philip," she said with a sudden piteousness, "you love me truly—with all your heart?"

"I love you more than life, Joan. You and you only, my darling."

He held her strongly to him; their lips met in a long kiss.

A hand stole between the dark curtains at the end of the room, and moved them very slightly apart. In the gap was revealed dimly the profile of Drummond, on his face a mocking smile as he glanced back at Hilda Detchmere, who stood behind him.

The curtains closed gently, shutting out that brief glimpse that had been visible in the gap between them. The lovers were wholly unconscious of it. Slowly Philip released Joan, and looked into her eyes.

"I did not think that the world would ever hold such happiness for me," he said.

"Are you very happy, Philip?" breathed Joan. "Ah, I was yours, I think, from the first day I met you. And I thought—I hoped," she added shyly, "that you loved me too. But lately, until this hour, you have seemed different. I was afraid."

"I scarcely dared," he said humbly, "to ask you the question that meant everything to me. Almost I had forced myself to leave it unspoken."

"But why?"

"For fear of what I might seem in your eyes. For

the doubt that might come to you—that I asked you now, because you have position and wealth," said Philip. "Yet no such thought seems to enter your mind. You are too pure-hearted. Do you not see, Joan, how things are altered?"

"I see only that you love me—and that I love you," she answered. "I am still Joan; a few months ago I was a working girl. I am no better than I was then—and I hope, no worse. All these other things that you speak of are outside me—they are not me at all. But there is one—one that matters above all!"

A shadow darkened the happiness in her eyes, and gave place to doubt and fear.

"What is it, Joan?" asked Philip quickly. "What is the matter?"

"Answer me one question, Philip," she said faintly, "one only. For I am afraid."

"Ask it, sweetheart. You shall have nothing but the truth," he said quietly. But his eyes were uneasy. Joan sank into the chair, and he took her hands in his.

"It is not the silly question that all girls ask, according to the books," said Joan confusedly: "'Have you ever loved any one but me?' I do not mean it for that."

"But it is true, all the same!" said Philip. "On my soul, Joan, I never have."

"But has no one a claim upon you?" she said, looking him straight in the eyes. "Philip, I have heard—" she faltered slightly, "that this girl, Hilda Detchmere, was engaged to you, or that it was

understood." Joan's voice grew firmer. "There is only one thing that should be strong as love, Philip, and that is honour! I am no thief, and I will never take what should not be mine!"

Philip laughed lightly. There was a look of relief on his face, he pressed her hands tighter, and knelt by her.

"Now hear the truth, Joan! I care nothing for Hilda Detchmere. I have never asked her to be my wife. I have never made love to her. But perhaps there was once a sort of understanding, though it was never spoken of between us. I will make my confession, little Joan, and you shall judge me.

"Until I met you, love had never come into my life. And like the fool I was, I thought it never would. Oh, I was quite sure of it! Why, for that matter I believe still—had there been no Joan in this world.

"I was ambitious, and meant to win a high place among men. Nothing but the biggest would satisfy me—I'll have it yet. And when I thought about marriage at all—well, I thought it likely enough that I should marry. If a man means to rise high, a wife is a great help to him—if she, too, is clever and ambitious, and belongs to the *grand monde*. Such a woman, among others, is Hilda Detchmere. She is fairly well off, and so would be no drain upon my own income. Her family has influence. Hilda could hold her own with any woman in London as a hostess. She is, I think, not sentimental, and would not expect me to be. She would rather I attended to business, and fought my way to the top of the tree."

"You mean she did not care for you?" exclaimed Joan.

"Hilda? Never, in the sense you mean! She cared for me no more than I for her. We were good friends, that is all. There was never the shadow of pretence of affection in either of us. Hilda is incapable of it—she's hard as marble. Some women are. She thought of me as a man who meant to grasp the biggest prizes the Law has to offer, and had it in him to do it. Very likely she was wrong, and people overrate me. But Hilda considered me as a winning horse that was going to 'train on,' as they say on the Turf. Had I been poor, and a dullard, she would never have looked the way I went. And so, in a sense, it became tacitly understood. It would have been a marriage of convenience, on both sides."

Joan drew a long breath.

"And I thought," continued Philip, with a ring of self-contempt in his voice, "that I could make a marriage like that! For a time I actually believed it. But even before I knew you, Joan, I came to realize it was impossible. Joan, I hate talking like this. I can only say these things to you, dear, because you have asked me, and you have the right. But soon afterwards, though I have never loved Hilda Detchmere, I came actively to dislike her. Do you know when that was?"

"No. Why?"

"It was on the house-boat—and again later, when Hilda was so cruelly and needlessly insolent to you. I have little to boast of, heaven knows. But that a woman should publicly insult a girl because she

believed her to be poor, and of humble life, filled me with abhorrence. Enough of that. I know very little of women. I've made a clean breast of it, Joan. Do you now think anything is due from me to Hilda Detchmere?"

Joan's eyes flashed.

"No!" she said, "nothing! Love gives the only claim—love stands before all. If you had loved her, or she you—if ever you had asked her to be your wife, and she cared for you"—Joan choked—"I would have given you up, Philip! It would have ended here." She rose, trembling. "You love me, Philip—say again that you love me!"

. . . . . .

The immaculate Mr. Drummond conducted Hilda Detchmere silently away from the neighbourhood of the curtained room to a seat in a quiet conservatory. He judged she was scarcely in a condition to face the reception rooms. He gave her a chair, and seated himself.

"A very charming tableau, that," he said. "Do you mind if I smoke?"

She made no reply. Drummond lit a cigarette, and looked at her curiously. Hilda Detchmere's usually dark skin was a dead white, and her eyes were like live coals as she stared before her.

"I should judge," said Drummond thoughtfully, "that if you had had a lethal weapon in your hands just now, my dear Hilda, there might have been a tragedy in that room."

"You are right!" she said quietly. "I was in

the mood to kill. I would have done so, very gladly."

"One is reminded," said Drummond, "of the truth of that famous line, 'Love to anger turned.' Eh, Hilda?"

"Hate is more deep-seated in me, and far more surely roused. I have few secrets from you, Harold. I regarded Philip Mottisfont as my property. I held the reins in my hands. The thing was settled, even if it was not made public. It would have suited both of us; there was no other man I would have thrown in my lot with. What you call love I have never felt for him—nor for any man."

"I wonder," reflected Drummond to himself, "whether that is true?"

"When I am robbed of anything that I consider mine," said Hilda Detchmere, "I never rest till the debt is paid. Once or twice such a thing has happened to me. But this is quite a different affair. This cuts at the root of everything." Her voice trembled with passion. "I will have this account squared, at any cost to me."

"On Mottisfont?"

"No! That is not my way. I do not blame the man. It is the woman whom I want to see paying the price. This little upstart from the gutter!" Her fingers gripped Drummond and dug into his arm. "Harold, there is more in that girl's story than has been made known. But I believe *you* know! You said you could help me. I believe you have the power. Will you—can you?"

Drummond shook the ash from his cigarette.

"I prefer to put it like this," he said, and turning to her, he lowered his voice. "I will bet you two thousand pounds, Hilda, that within a very few weeks Lady Tallbois of Knayth will meet with a disaster so thorough and so deadly that it will satisfy even you."

Hilda's eyes shone.

"Ah!" she said, "you, who know everything—you mean that you can——"

"I mean that I do not intend to give myself away. You must ask me nothing more. I should not have said even as much as I have, but that I know you have one virtue, Hilda, that is rare in women—you are entirely secretive. Now, if you prefer to refuse my bet, no harm is done. Nothing will happen. But if you accept it—I shall win. It is a certainty. And you will pay the two thousand."

Hilda Detchmere nodded.

"I understand you. And I believe you," she said quietly. "When it comes off—I will pay. You know that I keep my word."

She sprang up from her chair.

"Take me downstairs. I will go home," she said in a stifled voice, "for I think that if I came face to face with that girl again I should kill her!"

Drummond offered his arm.

"You would make a big mistake," he said softly, "for apart from the natural penalty you would deprive yourself of an infinitely more satisfying vengeance. To that I pledge you my word."

He escorted his fascinating companion to the hall, and saw her into a taxi. Under the eyes of the foot-

men she bade Drummond a civil good night. He made his way up to Lady Dunluce's buffet and thoughtfully poured himself out a glass of Pommery.

"Although an active sharing partner in the firm of Callaghan, Limited," he murmured, "I do not see why I should not make a small profit for myself on the side."

CHAPTER XVI

"LEST AULD ACQUAINTANCE——"

"MR. NORMAN VAILLE, m'lady," said the footman.

"Show him in," replied Joan.

She was sitting on the sofa in the great morning room of the Tallbois house in Grosvenor Square. In a few moments Mr. Vaille appeared, admirably groomed, and whatever he may have felt, he looked quite at his ease. He greeted Joan gravely, and she, with a cold little bow, motioned him to a chair.

"I have sent for you, Mr. Vaille, in order to deal with your claim," she said, "although the cost of the case fell on me, and not on you. I think I should point that out."

"It was by your own choice, Lady Tallbois," said Vaille deprecatingly. "I would have borne the costs. But by the terms under which I forwarded the proofs to your lawyers——"

"I have no wish to discuss that, nor whether I am, under the law, indebted to you at all," interrupted Joan, who was feeling a curious repulsion for Mr. Vaille. "I am fulfilling my word, and the undertaking I gave." She opened a drawer, and laid before him a little pile of crackling bank-notes. "I prefer to deal in these, as it is not my wish to draw a cheque in your name."

Mr. Vaille's slim fingers grasped the notes; a very pleasant, seductive sensation they gave. He gave no sign of the triumph that consumed him. But on counting the wad, he found it contained only ten thousand pounds.

Mr. Vaille's eyes hardened and grew cold. Was she attempting to bargain with him?

"That," said Joan unconcernedly, "is one third of the sum due to you. I have not yet had time to go into the Knayth finances—what balance I have and what money I shall require—but I wished to make a payment on account of the debt at once, before there is any dispute about it, and formally admit the claim. So I have drawn this ten thousand. I want the thing settled immediately, and you will receive within four or five days the other twenty thousand."

Vaille drew an inward breath of relief. He bowed his assent. She asked for a written acknowledgment of the money, and he gave it her.

"With regard to the balance," he said.

"I intend that it shall be paid into your hands in person," she said coldly, "and you will sign a deed giving me a full discharge of all liability. I am leaving town shortly, and I wish you to come to Knayth Abbey, at ten on the evening of the 23d, when I will pay you the balance."

"As you please, Lady Tallbois," said Vaille without hesitation; "at Knayth on the 23d, if you wish it, by all means."

He began a florid little speech, suppressing with difficulty the elation that was in him. But Joan cut

him short, and dismissed him. The footman who showed Mr. Vaille out looked at him curiously; he had never seen such a gleam of greed and triumph in a man's eyes as Vaille, in an unguarded moment, permitted to appear there.

"The little fool!" grinned Mr. Vaille as he walked down Grosvenor Square. "When Callaghan makes his next move, what a flutter there will be in this luxurious dovecot!"

Joan, as soon as Mr. Vaille was gone, promptly dismissed him from her mind. She had long decided that he and the unctuous Mr. Bell, despite their speciousness, were a particularly shady pair. Yet she was determined to discharge the debt and be done with it. The sum she had to part with was too big for her fully to realize its meaning. What did it matter—out of a million? Her mind had no grasp of money—it wandered quickly back to Philip; her champion from the first, her wonderful lover.

She was to meet Philip for luncheon at a restaurant near the Law Courts. He was engaged in a big case there. Joan spent some time in making herself look particularly charming, and reaching the place at the appointed hour, found Philip waiting for her.

"Joan!" he exclaimed, "you are like a breath from a rose-garden, after these musty old courts."

Joan laughed, and they had a merry meal together. The viands that the waiters brought got small attention from either. They talked of their plans for the golden future, and Joan of her entry, which was arranged for the next day, to Knayth Abbey. She said nothing of her settlement with Vaille. She

thought it might worry Philip, and Joan had no mind to let anything cloud their meeting.

"Tell me what you have been doing," she said just before they left. "You've been leading in another case? You won it, of course?"

"Well, yes," he said, smiling, "as it happens I won it."

"You always do!" she said proudly. "What was it, Philip?"

"Nothing important," he answered, toying with the menu card. "A breach of promise case. I had rather a tough fight."

"Ah!" murmured Joan, "and so the girl was given justice—against the man who had broken his word."

"No," said Philip, smiling, "it was given against her."

"But you said you won."

"I appeared for the defendant—the man," Philip replied.

"I see." Joan's eyes looked slightly troubled. "And you said it was a tough fight. Perhaps if you had appeared for the girl then, or if the man had had a less clever counsel, she would have won."

Philip laughed.

"It is not for me to say that. You will make me conceited, Joan. I won, let it go at that. Why these questions, dear? Are you pitying the girl?"

"Certainly I cannot imagine any woman setting the loss of her love in terms of money," said Joan slowly, "and yet it is hard not to pity her. Do you not feel that?"

"Not in the least," he answered. "You did not

hear the case. There are two sides to a bargain. The girl did not, or could not, fulfil her share of the compact. I consider the man was right. But, dear heart, these are dry topics—let us talk of something else. I find I've nothing on, after all, before four, when there is a case in chambers. I want to be with you every minute I can, Joan. You said you would like to hear Moisewitch—he is playing at Queen's. There is time for that; shall we go?"

Joan assented gladly. They left the place, and walked along the street to find a cab. She glanced happily up at Philip's handsome face; it was good to know that she would not have to leave him yet. At that moment she became aware that an oddly dressed man who passed was staring at her intently. She met his eyes, and instantly stopped.

"Alf!" she exclaimed.

It was Alf Blodmore, in chess-board tweeds and a scarlet tie.

Mottisfont controlled his astonishment at this unlooked-for meeting. Mr. Alf Blodmore had stopped too. There was something so pathetic in his eyes that Joan was carried straightway from her new life back to the old days of Lambeth and the office and the river. With a quick impulse she held out her hand frankly to Blodmore.

"It is so long since I've seen you, Alf," she said. "You have heard my news? Have you seen Emmie? You know that she is going to be married!"

"Yes Miss—m'lady," stammered Alf. "She—she's goin' to marry Ted."

"I hope she will be very happy. I'm going to be

married too," said Joan. And then she suddenly became confused. Hardly realizing what she was doing, she made a motion of her hand towards Philip. "Do you know my fiancé, Alf? Mr. Blodmore—Mr. Mottisfont."

Philip looked with faint surprise at this curious bounder with the baggy tweeds and blood-red tie. But he raised his hat courteously. Alf's face, however, became grey and drawn. He turned his strained eyes upon Joan.

"I wish you luck, m'lady," he said hoarsely. And shuffling his cap awkwardly on his head, he passed on without another word. Joan and Philip went silently on their way.

Alf Blodmore walked eastwards with a blind, hesitating step. Twice he bumped into passers-by. He halted at last, in the mouth of a Fleet Street alleyway, and stared before him, his mouth working.

"My gaw!" he muttered thickly. "It's more'n I can stand!"

The swing doors of a bar stood invitingly close by. Blodmore thrust them apart, entered, and called dazedly for spirits. He gulped down a stiff glass as though it had been water of the brook.

Alf was usually abstemious. Over-indulgence was not one of his failings. He felt just then as though somebody had struck him on the solar plexus. The drink seemed to pull him together and clear his head.

The girl behind the bar looked doubtfully at the tall, thin youth with the strained white face and vacant eyes that stared at nothing. There was some-

thing wrong with him; she resolved privately that she would not serve him with anything more. She was not required to, however. After a short pause, Alf pulled himself together and left the place. He also left his change on the counter. The barmaid went after him, but he had disappeared.

Blodmore clambered on to a bus, and by rapid stages travelled north-eastwards to Hackney. He did not, perhaps, look a romantic figure, but it would have been hard for any one else to realize the tragedy that had stunned him. Descending at last, he tramped mechanically along Billiter Street, a long, dingy thoroughfare, and arrived at his home, a small shop, over which was the name "SAMUEL TAGGART," and the legend "Naturalistic Emporium."

The place had the appearance of a small and disorderly zoo. It was noisy with the song of birds; numberless canaries were making shrill melody; in the window guinea-pigs were browsing on green stuff, and at the door a cynical-looking magpie without a tail croaked at Alf thoughtfully. Inside were many small dogs, a sleepy badger in a cage, birds of every description, and a litter of Persian kittens.

There was nobody in charge of the shop, but a freckled small boy with an intelligent expression and a very red head, who nodded cheerfully to Alf. The latter walked straight through into the little dark parlour behind the shop. He closed the door silently.

A cock bullfinch in a cage by the window turned a bead-bright eye on Alf, chirruped, and began to pipe, "When the Boys Come Home" with surprising richness and volume. It was Alf who had taught

the bird to pipe. He had a wonderful gift with all small creatures in fur or feathers.

Now, however, the bullfinch's song did not seem to appeal to him. There was still the look of tragedy in his eyes. He sank into a chair beside the little table.

"Goin' to marry him!" he whispered. "I know him." His face became suffused with dull red. "It's Mottisfont—the barrister chap."

Alf's chin sunk on his breast.

"I never was her class. She's rich now. An' he——"

The bullfinch suddenly became silent.

"I'd like to have him by the throat! I—I wish I hadn't seen 'em together."

His voice broke.

"Little Joan—my little Joan!"

Alf dropped his forearm on the table and bowed his head upon it. His shoulders heaved and shook. The bullfinch began to whistle "Annie Laurie," but broke off in the middle of a bar, and ruffled its feathers.

Presently a step was heard in the shop, and the parlour door opened quietly. A man of about fifty entered, bullet-headed, broken-nosed, his face like a hard, frost-bitten apple, seamed all over with tiny wrinkles. Blodmore did not stir. He seemed unconscious of the new-comer, who looked at him thoughtfully for some moments and then laid a hand on his shoulder.

"What you grizzlin' for, Alf?" he asked gently.

Alf looked up.

"Nothin'," he said dully. "I was a bit tired, that's all, uncle."

Mr. Sam Taggart, owner of the Naturalistic Emporium, shook his head. His deep-set eyes peered very kindly and thoughtfully at Alf.

"It don't go, Alf. I been watchin' you for a good while past. You've got the hump uncommon bad. You're grizzlin' over a gal, my lad. Now, ain't that it?"

Alf nodded.

"There was never man or dog yet but I couldn't tell what's wrong with 'em," declared Mr. Taggart wisely. "Sprained tendons, mange, distemper, or love—I know all the symptoms. Who is she Alf? She's turned you down?"

"I never did stand any chance," said Alf bitterly. "Not an outside one even. I saw her today, an' I'm sorry for it. She's goin' to get married—to a toff!"

"So that finishes it, eh? But how about puttin' one across the toff? It's easy for you, with a straight left like yours. I've known wonders worked that way."

"I'd like nothin' better!" said Alf between his teeth. "I've thought of it. But no, it's no good. Only make her unhappy, an' I'll never do that. All the same——"

"Now look here, Alf, I can't have you frettin' like this. You'll be gettin' relaxed muscles. Cut it all out, my lad, like a man. Finish it! Remember you've got talents that mustn't be wasted. I've got the cure for you." He tapped Alf on the shoulder. "We'll have a little instruction. Go an' get the gloves on, my boy."

Alf rose obediently and went up to a wide bare room on the first floor, unfurnished save for empty bird-cages round the walls. Alf stripped to the waist and tightened his belt. He took down a pair of hard leather boxing-gloves from a hook, drew them on, and stood erect.

Alf Blodmore looked a different being to the young man who had slouched into the shop. In his ill-fitting clothes he had a lanky, slack appearance. But now he showed a head well set on his shoulders, and a surprisingly white skin, with a bloom on it like silk. Though his limbs were slim, the muscles played and rippled over his chest and arms as he moved.

Mr. Samuel Taggart, chief celebrity of Billiter Street, and ex-champion middle-weight, entered also gloved and stripped to the buff. His shoulders and powerful bowed chest were knotted like the bole of an oak. He looked over his nephew approvingly.

"Good lad! Alf, never forget you've got a gift in you, an' I'm goin' to bring it out. You're doin' me credit. You've beat some of the selling-platers already, but before I've done I'll have you in the Ring to meet the big stuff! Now come on, mind that right jab of yours, an' remember not to guard down!"

They faced each other for a moment, both wary as cats. Then Alf led with a slashing attack that kept even the trained old boxer busy. Blodmore had an excellent swift right, and his footwork was wonderful. There was a power and body-weight behind his punches that no one would have suspected. More than once Taggart yelped with delight and appreciation of his pupil.

Rapidly they warmed up to their work; the smack and thud of the gloves echoed round the bare walls. No onlooker, whether man or woman, could have failed to feel a respect for Alf then. He fought with skill and determination; he took heavy punishment when it came, without the least flinching. Taggart kept up a running fire of encouragement and ring-craft.

"Keep that guard up! Quicker swing with the right, lad. A mighty poor punch for ten-stone-ten. That's better!"

Suddenly it came into Alf's mind, like a fantasy, that it was not his uncle that faced him, but Philip Mottisfont. He saw red. With smashing blows he bored in, striking out like a tiger, his teeth clenched, and a mist before his eyes. It was all the old boxer could do to side-step him. For a minute the fight became a whirlwind.

"Steady!" cried Taggart warningly. "What's gettin' you? Hold your temper in, Alf—you don't win that way. See!"

Alf went spinning back against the wall from a blow that nearly beat the breath out of his body. Taggart admonished him sharply. He rallied again and came on, mastering himself, and fighting coolly and steadily. Suddenly there was a whizzing right upper-cut, and Taggart himself was laid full length upon the boards.

He sprang up again, and dragging off his glove, shook Alf's hand in a transport of delight.

"That's the stuff," he cried. "A chap that's got a punch of his own like that—why, he owes it to humanity to develop it. It's the Blodmore speciality.

I gave you the openin'—you want to get it a bit quicker, that's all. It's you for Wonderland next week, an' I'll try you against the Chatham Chicken. Now what have you got to grouse at, Alf? You'll have this little business when I'm gone, you're doin' well a'ready—an' I'll make a ringsman of you."

"It's all I ask for," said Alf. "I love the game."

"A grand old game it is. Don't you feel better, you young mug?"

"I do. A heap," said Alf.

"Course you do. It's the sure cure. Go and sponge down lad, an' then take the shop. I got to go out."

Five minutes later Alf returned to the shop and took duty. The mists were swept from his brain, the look of pain had left his eyes. There was still a dull ache at his heart, but he felt he could face the world boldly. The little red-headed boy was gone, and he was alone in the shop. He grew very thoughtful, and as there was no other company he talked to the cynical-looking magpie in the wicker cage, who seemed to understand him thoroughly.

Presently there was a step at the door and a lady entered. Alf glanced up.

It was Joan Tallbois. There was a hesitating, apologetic look in her eyes. Blodmore stared at her in utter astonishment.

"Alf," she said pathetically, flushing a little, "I—I hope I wasn't abrupt when we met this morning? We are old friends. I felt that I must come down here and see you."

"You—you're heartily welcome," he answered. "I'm glad you've come—m'lady."

"Don't call me that!" she said almost impatiently. "Alf, I came because there are things I have to say. I want to ask you something——"

She broke off abruptly, and glanced towards the window; there was apprehension, almost fear, in them, and Alf saw it.

"Is there anything wrong?" he asked quickly.

"A man has been watching and following me all the way—ever since I've been alone," she said in a whisper. "Alf, I believe he is near by here now!"

In a moment Blodmore was alert; his jaw stuck out truculently, and his eyes gleamed.

"Watchin' you? Worryin' you, is he, Miss Joan! Now that is exactly the sort o' thing I like to tackle; you leave it to me. Who is he? Has he spoke to you?"

"No. And I don't know who he is, but I am certain of what I say," replied Joan nervously. "I've seen him several times since I left the West End, and the last time was only ten minutes ago."

"What's he like?"

"I don't think I can describe him; a man about thirty, with a smooth face, wearing dark blue clothes and a grey hat."

Alf came round the corner to the door and looked rapidly up and down the street. It was almost deserted except for a few children, and there was nobody in sight answering to Joan's description. Alf asked her to look for herself, and tell him if she could see the man.

"No," she said, "I can see nothing of him now. Perhaps the whole thing was only my fancy. Curious

things have been happening lately; maybe my nerves are out of order, and I am only being silly."

Alf returned behind the counter, looking disappointed.

"Was this what you wanted to tell me about, Miss Joan?" he asked.

"No. It just happened on the way. Never mind it. One thing I have to ask you is this. I am unable to find Emmie. She is not at the Lambeth rooms, and has left the office; she has not answered a letter I wrote her. We parted some days ago," added Joan hesitating. "She was angry, I think, and so was I. I should hate to believe there was any bitterness between us. You are sure to see her, Alf—will you tell her that I want to be friends?"

"Of course I'll tell her."

"Please do. And you, Alf, won't you tell me what you are doing now? How are things with you?"

"Well enough," said Alf with a wry smile. "I'm raisin' pigeons an' trainin' bullfinches for the old man—and he's trainin' me. The idea is, I'm to be a boxer. He thinks I've a gift for it. I've fought a small match already, an' won it."

"Did you? I think I should like to see you box, Alf. I suppose it's a shocking confession to make. There's a fighting strain in me somewhere; I can't help it," laughed Joan.

Alf's eyes brightened. He felt that of all things he would have liked Joan to see him box. He was conscious of being at his best in the Ring.

"I'm afraid I ain't likely to get into the class that fights at Olympia or the Stadium," he said simply.

"The sort o' places in the East End where I puts on the gloves would be a bit too rough for a lady. I'm tryin' to make good, though."

"But wouldn't you like something better than all this?" urged Joan. "You won't be offended, Alf, at what I'm going to say? You know that I have had wonderful good fortune—that I am quite rich, in fact?"

"Yes," said Alf slowly. "I know the whole story. I'm more glad for your sake than I can say. We all are."

"But this morning when we met I felt that you were hurt," said Joan impulsively, "and I was hurt, too, with the fear that anybody could think that I was altered—that I could be cut off from those who were my friends. I want to keep them still. And more than that; you know that I have far more wealth than I can ever use—enough for twenty people. I am almost ashamed of it. Won't you—" she was embarrassed and spoke haltingly—"won't you let me help you along in life? I know my friends would have done it for me. Won't you let me give you something out of all this?"

Alf looked straight at her.

"Yes," he said quietly, "you might give me that rose you're wearin'."

Joan coloured, and hesitated. She could scarcely have told even herself why she had come there; it was through some impulse of pity and sympathy. This request was the last she desired.

"It's the only thing I'll ever ask o' you," said Alf, "but not unless you please."

Joan took the rose from her bosom silently and handed it to him. Alf's fingers trembled a little as they closed on the stem.

"Thank you," he said simply. "An' now may I say a word of my own? You ain't altered—but you'll have to. You can't hold by the likes of us. Your life and ours lie a long way apart, an' better for both sides that they should. Nor you can't give us money, so please don't offer it. As for me, the kindest thing you can do, Miss Joan, is to leave me alone, an' not see me again."

Joan hung her head.

"I shall never forget you," said Alf, "till I'm dead. I'm just glad you're goin' to be happy. If the prayers of a rough 'un like me are any good (which I don't suppose) you have 'em every day. See now, I've followed all that case of yours, in the papers, an' I know a bit more about it, too. It's a strange story, an' I've seen more of life than you have. D'ye know what I'm prayin'? That you won't have trouble comin' to you through it yet."

"I don't think so," said Joan. "My troubles have finished. The future is clear, and better than ever I deserved."

"Lord send it is so. I believe you. One last thing then, before we says good-bye. You've made me a gift. Let me give you one, Miss Joan. Just a little sooveneer like, that I value very much an' would be glad for you to have. Will you accept it?"

"Of course I will!" said Joan.

"Just a minute then."

Alf left the shop, and presently returned with a

wicker cage, in which sat a superb grey homing pigeon.

"This is the sooveneer," said Alf. "You might give him a nice roomy loft, but don't let him go."

"What a beauty!" exclaimed Joan, putting a finger through the bars. The homer turned a wise, round eye upon her and crooned thoughtfully, as though to say, "What a charming little lady." Joan laughed aloud. "What is his name?"

"Well," said Alf, "I call him 'Jack Quicksilver.' I bred him myself, an' he's taken three first prizes for long distance flights. There ain't his equal in all Hackney. He's for you."

"But, Alf, what a shame to take him from you!"

"I'll be only too happy to know you've got him for a pet," said Alf quickly. "He's my partin' gift, Miss Joan."

Joan felt a lump rising in her throat. It was impossible to refuse.

"Thank you, Alf. It is good of you. I'll always care for him myself."

"Half a mo'," said Alf. "You see them two little rings on his leg?"

"Yes."

Alf leaned across the counter.

"If ever any trouble was to come to you, or any danger," he said in a lower voice, "if ever you thought you could do with any help, you've only to slip a little note under them rings an' let Jack Quicksilver go. He'd be here quicker than the wind. Then you'd have one friend left who'd give his life for you an' never ask any reward."

Joan held out her hand and bade Alf good-bye silently. She felt unable to speak. She left the place, bearing with her "Jack Quicksilver," who crooned soothingly. The parting was so quaint that Joan, though her eyes were wet, suppressed a rather tremulous little laugh. Alf watched her out of sight.

He retreated behind his counter, and for some time sat musing. A shadow presently fell on the door, and a man entered. He wore a blue serge suit and grey hat, his face was smooth and shiny, his eyes a trifle furtive. Alf's suspicions were immediately aroused.

"What can I do for you?" he asked.

"A pennyworth of bird seed, please," replied the man.

While it was being wrapped up the purchaser leaned an elbow on the counter and lowered his voice to a confidential pitch.

"A pretty well-known customer that, who took away the pigeon just now, eh?" he said.

Alf glanced at him.

"Yes, you're right," replied Alf thoughtfully.

"I know a good deal about you, too, Mr. Alfred Blodmore," murmured the buyer of bird seed pleasantly. "I can do you some good, and also put a little money in your way. Are you open for a small job?"

"I've got one," said Alf.

His left fist whizzed out like a projectile; the customer, receiving it under the point of the jaw, crashed back against the boarded wall behind him and fell.

Alf vaulted the counter lightly and laid hands on him. The stranger arrived in a heap on the pavement outside, and his grey hat was flung after him.

"The next time you 'ang round after that lady," said Alf grimly, "you'll get hurt, my lad, instead of bein' played with. Get!"

The man picked up his hat and shuffled away down the street, groaning.

"I reckon," he muttered feelingly, "Mister Drummond'll have to pay up a bit extra for this job—or do it himself."

CHAPTER XVII

THE RIFT IN THE LUTE

"KNAYTH tomorrow!" said Joan joyously. "I'm having the Rolls-Royce sent up here on purpose, and a luggage car. All the arrangements are made, and we'll drive straight down after lunch."

"Joan you're like a schoolgirl on the first day of the holidays," said Lady Dunluce approvingly, looking up from the desk at which she was busily writing letters.

"Well, it's just how I feel!" said Joan. "Everything is perfectly heavenly, but it won't seem real to me till I go down myself and take charge. And it's charming of you to take all this trouble; to go with me and help me through it."

"Bless your little heart, I wouldn't miss it for anything," said Lady Dunluce. "It's all working out beyond anything I ever hoped for. The missing heiress, beautiful as a rose washed with dew, enters the halls of her ancestors in triumph!" she added with intense relish. "Bless you, Joan, for bringing Romance to me in my old age. For years I have yawned my head off waiting for it."

"Yes, I believe you are enjoying yourself more than I am," laughed Joan.

"To be sure. The only thing missing is a villain,"

sighed Lady Dunluce; "nobody seems to have been cast for the part. You haven't noticed a villain anywhere about, Joan? One of the modern kind for choice, good-looking, with evening dress and an eyeglass."

"No. And I don't want one," said Joan emphatically.

"That is selfish of you," complained her hostess. "A good villain would liven things up and make me really happy. But about these people I have invited for your house-warming at Knayth, Joan. I have told you all their names, but here are one or two more we will send for. General Sinkler?"

"Oh, yes," said Joan, "he is charming, though rather old."

"We must have him. He always puts his foot in it, and says and does the wrong things. It livens people up, and you never know what he will say: he is quite famous for it, and if he did not do it he would never get asked anywhere. The Ravelins? You like them, I know. Brother and sister—jolly young people. You'll make any amount of friends of your own before long," added Lady Dunluce, "but while I'm playing a sort of chaperon—beastly Victorian word that is—I'm responsible for the people you know."

"You, who backed me when I was an outsider, will always be the first of my women friends," said Joan smiling. "But I shall not need a chaperon much longer, for I shall chaperon others."

"Eh!" exclaimed Lady Dunluce, cocking an eye at her sharply.

"That ends the list of guests, doesn't it?" said Joan rather rapidly. "Philip, by the way, will come down on the following day; he cannot get away earlier."

"Philip?" echoed Lady Dunluce, still looking at the girl. It was the first time she had heard Joan use Mottisfont's Christian name.

Joan, blushing slightly, placed an appealing hand on the old lady's arm.

"Will you forgive me?" she pleaded. "You who befriended me from the beginning? I should have told you before, but even now you are the first to hear it. On the night of your party I was so flooded with congratulations upon my victory and my inheritance, that I felt I must keep this far greater thing to myself—if only for a few days. I did not want it to be another—another public sensation," she said a little piteously, "on the heels of the other. It would have seemed like sacrilege to me. And so——"

"Joan!" exclaimed Lady Dunluce rising, "do you mean to tell me——?"

The door opened.

"Mr. Mottisfont," announced a footman.

"Show him up," said Lady Tallbois.

Philip entered, spruce and debonair as always. He greeted his hostess warmly, and gave his hand, quite formally, to Joan. Lady Dunluce looked at the man's face, and at the girl's.

"Joan was about to take me into her confidence when you came in," she said, "but it is not necessary, for now I know all that you can tell me."

Philip turned to his hostess.

"Kindest of ladies," he said smiling, "till now my lips have been sealed by order. Joan has promised to be my wife, and I am the happiest man in England."

"And the luckiest," said Lady Dunluce.

"And the luckiest," repeated Philip. "No one knows it better than I."

The old lady took one of their hands in each of hers.

"Bless you, my children," she said. "You need not go down on your knees, however. May you be very, very happy."

She quitted the room a little abruptly, leaving them together. There was a slight shadow on Lady Dunluce's face as she went down to the morning room. Presently she saw Mottisfont go out; he did not stay very long. Lady Dunluce found Joan alone, pink of cheek, and radiant. She put an arm round the girl's waist affectionately.

"Do you love him very much, Joan?" she said softly.

"Love him!" said Joan. "I cannot put it into words. I love Philip more than life. Without him my world would be empty. People think of me as fortunate, but they do not know why. In this one thing there is such happiness as I never dreamed of—that Philip loves me!"

There was a note in the girl's voice that made Lady Dunluce look at her strangely.

"I am more glad than I can say, that you are so happy, dear. Though we have known each other so

short a time, you are very much to me, Joan. Yes, he loves you. But did this come to you like a thunder-clap? You must have loved him before all these wonderful things happened?"

"Oh, long before. Even when I was a Temple typist, living in a top-floor back, south of the water, and Philip used to come to the office sometimes with work for me. I had no more idea then of my present fortune, than of being Queen of England. Is that romance enough for you?" said Joan smiling.

"I am not sure that it is," said Lady Dunluce gravely. "To me, romance means so many things, Joan. And Philip—he loved you in those days?"

"I—I thought so. Now I know that he did."

"But he never spoke of it to you?"

"Of course not. I scarcely saw him outside the office. I did not come to know him well until my case began."

"You saw much more of him then. And when did he ask you—the great question?"

"On the night of your reception."

"When your victory had been made complete."

"What do you mean?" Joan lifted her head proudly.

"I only mean that Philip is a wonderful fellow," said Lady Dunluce quietly. "One would think that success was his birthright—all things that he desires seem to come to him, and he always makes sure. Well, he loves you, Joan, and what else matters? I am an old woman, but I know that little matters beside love." She kissed the girl quickly. "Be very happy, dear."

Joan went up to her room. She was more than a little angry, inwardly, with Lady Dunluce. The old dame's meaning was only too plain. When Joan was alone she became pensive, and her lip quivered slightly. The little cloud, no bigger than a man's hand, in the sky of her otherwise perfect happiness, darkened.

Philip loved her, yet she could not but feel that his love was of another quality than hers. There was the brooding doubt, the ever-recurring question. Would he have asked her to be his wife if she had remained obscure and penniless? Daily, and always in the watches of the night, that query came to her lips.

And the answer was—no. Joan felt it so; no reasoning could argue it away. She knew he would have done nothing of the kind. He would have stifled whatever love he felt, and gone on his way. A small, fluttering sigh escaped Joan.

"What have I to complain of?" she said. "This miracle that I prayed for, the wealth and the position that would leave him free to speak—hasn't it come to me? What right had I to expect that he should give up so much for me?"

Yet the little pain and the little doubt remained.

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The superb car that had been sent up from Clievemead stood at the curb in Charles Street. Joan, pink with excitement and expectation, came out in a fur motoring-coat and veil, bearing with her a wicker cage.

"What on earth have you got there?" asked Lady Dunluce.

"It's a pigeon—a great pet of mine," said Joan. "I'm going to take him to Knayth."

Lady Dunluce put up her lorgnette and inspected Jack Quicksilver.

"What an extraordinarily confident-looking bird," she remarked. "He seems pleased with himself. I can't call him handsome, with those rings round his eyes."

"Handsome is, as handsome does," said Joan. "I've taken a liking to him."

"Well, I suppose the gentleman can ride in the car with us. I am leaving my humble home behind, and you are in command now, Joan," said Lady Dunluce, as she disposed herself comfortably and drew a rug over her knees. The cage travelled on the seat opposite; the car ran swiftly down Charles Street. In half an hour it had left London behind, and was humming through the open country towards Berkshire.

The winding levels of the river came in view, and after a splendid run the car climbed the steep hill to the gates of the Abbey. On the old stone column on either hand stood the carved wyvern that was the Tallbois crest; the same quaint monster that Captain Grier had seen tattooed in effigy on the arm of William, that wanderer on the face of the earth, last male descendant of the ancient race.

The gates stood wide, the old woman who kept the lodge stood by and curtseyed as the car purred between them and followed the winding road through

the park. Never had the old Abbey, with its myriad windows and ivied towers, looked more superb than it did when Joan's car drew up before the entrance. The westering sun gilded it like a palace of fairyland. A thrill ran through Joan's veins as she looked at it; for some moments she sat motionless, feasting her eyes. An old gentleman with white hair and a grave, eager face hurried forward and opened the car door. It was Mr. Deane.

"Welcome to Knayth, my lady—welcome!" he said tremulously.

"For the second time," said Joan, as she took his hand in hers. "I shall never forget my first and kindest friend at Knayth."

The old man seemed quite overcome; he could do nothing but murmur eager words of welcome, with some broken reference to the Knayth Goblet. Joan presented him to Lady Dunluce. There was a great floral tribute, beautifully arranged, over the entrance; a small gathering of happy, smiling servants were in the hall, kept in the background by the awful majesty of Mr. Pond, the butler, who for once showed signs of deep human emotion. Joan greeted them all.

The rest of the afternoon was pure wonder and delight. Joan explored the whole place, taking Lady Dunluce with her. That excellent dame knew considerably more about Knayth than its youthful owner, having frequently stayed there, and was able to satisfy Joan's thirst for knowledge about her inheritance.

Tea was set for them on tables under the shade of trees in the water-garden. Lady Dunluce lay back

in her chair and listened to the soothing plash of the fountains, with a sight of content.

"You have a great deal to give, Joan," she said, "and the best gift of all is—yourself."

"That seems to me a small thing," said Joan dreamily. "I am glad there is something more."

They were alone in the house for the first night; the guests were not due till the morrow, and Joan was glad of it. A charming little dinner was served in the Long Room, and she insisted on Mr. Deane dining with them. The old gentleman proved delightful company. Lady Dunluce was all for having down the Knayth Goblet and seeing Joan solve its secret, but the girl declined, laughing.

"Once is enough," she said. "I might fail and disappoint you. Then someone might say I was not the rightful heiress." The Goblet remained in its cage, its gems shimmering faintly. It was yet early when Joan bade her guest an affectionate good night and went up to her room. For some time she lay awake under the silken coverlet of the great state bed, looking up drowsily at the fretted ceiling.

"It is all more wonderful than the web of a dream," she whispered. "Surely—surely I shall be happy here?"

The cry of the questing owls in the park answered her. Joan fell into a deep sleep.

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The morning broke fresh and fair, with merry wind and smiling sun. After breakfast Lady Dunluce was busy in consultation with Mr. Deane over the arrangements for the house-party and Joan's

coming guests; it was a task after Lady Dunluce's heart. Joan herself was glad enough to be relieved of it and took no part; there was only one guest who mattered to her. Philip was due that morning. There was magic in the thought.

At eleven his car drove up. Joan was waiting for him, standing on the top of the old stone steps, her vivid beauty framed in the wide doorway, the carved Tallbois shield above. So striking a picture was she that Philip halted, and stayed a moment gazing. Joan held out her hands to him with a smile.

"Come, Philip," she said, "others must wait to be asked. You alone have the right."

He took her hands; they passed together across the hall, where the mellow sunlight shone through stained glass upon the grim suits of armour. They found themselves in the shaded morning-room, alone.

There was a pause. Philip looked into Joan's eyes, tongue-tied, almost in awe. She glanced at him, laughing gently, and lifted her face. He caught her in his arms and kissed her tenderly. She felt his heart beating.

"Joan!" he whispered, and there was a thrill in his voice that was new to her. "Joan, my dear—my dear!"

Her lips answered him. For a minute both were silent. Slowly Philip released her and stood with his hands lightly resting on her shoulders.

"Darling," he said, "I am a little afraid of you this morning. How this beautiful place suits you—and how perfectly you suit it. It is as though you were a part of Knayth."

"Am I? I'm so glad, Philip."

"You are like a rare jewel, torn from its setting and lost, then found and mounted in its right place by some magician of a goldsmith. You feel the wonder of it?"

"I do. But I was beginning to feel lonely already, Philip—till you came. I forgot; I'm your hostess. What would you like to do, dearest?"

"I should like to stay here all day—and kiss you."

"But that's impossible," said Joan laughing. "They are preparing for this tiresome house-party that's coming; there will be no peace indoors. Let us go into the sunshine. You are a horseman, of course, Philip? Shall we ride together?"

"What, now?"

"Yes. It is a whim of mine." Joan smiled and blushed. "I should like to show you your kingdom, Philip."

"Mine? Never mine! Yours, Joan."

"Ours, then," she answered. "Will you ride with me, Sir Knight?"

"I will ride with you, Joan, to the world's end," he said, and kissed her again. Joan rang and ordered two horses to be saddled; she went to her room, and came down in twenty minutes, looking adorable in a dark grey riding-habit. Philip, too, had changed; the horses were ready saddled at the steps.

Joan's was a chestnut mare, with admirable shoulders and a mouth like velvet. She patted the mare's arching neck and spoke to it. Philip cupped his hand for Joan's little foot, and lifted her into the saddle lightly as a bird. He swung himself onto

his own mount, a big raking bay hunter. The groom's eyes followed them approvingly as they moved off down the drive.

"Smart couple," he said; "bred 'uns, both of 'em."

The riders made for the park, and stretched out into a hard canter across the smooth turf, up the rising ground that gave a view over three counties. The whistling wind and thudding hoofs made the blood tingle in Joan's veins like wine. She looked at Philip, and noted with a thrill of pleasure his strong, graceful figure and perfect horseman's seat. His mount was fresh and twice attempted to bolt; he controlled it easily, with a hand light but firm as iron.

"How well you ride!" said Joan.

"I was thinking the same of you," Philip answered admiringly; "you look perfection on that mare, Joan, though your style is very different from the English hunting seat. Where did you learn?"

"I have ridden almost since I could walk. There were plenty of ponies in the Calcraft country. And Uncle Jim—I mean my father," she said, flushing slightly, "used to ride with me on those rare visits of his. He could ride anything. But the last time we were together I could not have been more than nine years old. I never saw him after that."

The topic, so suddenly brought up, reduced Philip to silence. Joan noticed it. She turned to him quickly.

"Philip," she said gravely, "there is something still that has never been cleared up—something I have hardly dared refer to till now. It is the mys-

tery about my father's life. You remember that strange warning in Janet Mackellar's letter. Nothing more has come of it. But I am convinced more things have come to your knowledge than you have told me, since the case was judged. I want you to tell me all you know."

Philip looked between his horse's ears. The subject did not please him.

"It is difficult, Joan, for me to speak to you about this," he said seriously. "It would be best to ask me nothing."

"No!" she replied. "I am not a child. I want the truth!"

"Well, if you will have it, dear," he said uncomfortably, "I must speak very plainly. You know already that, back there in the States, your father had been—in trouble?"

"I have been told so."

"Yes; but it is very much graver than you suppose. It seems that the record of William Tallbois is now fully known. The police have connected him with things which"—Philip broke off and hesitated—"I will only say, Joan, that if he were alive now, his punishment would be heavy; that is, if this story is true. I hate to say these things to you; please spare me."

"I asked you," said Joan, in a low voice. "Tell me all."

"I cannot, for it has not been told to me. Yet the authorities know it; they have the whole story, and they alone. Don't let it grieve you, little Joan. I have tried to keep it from you."

Joan was silent. She had insisted on the information. It could only mean one thing; that no small matter had caused her father to be hunted by the Law. She guessed, reading between the lines, that his very life would have been forfeit.

"Think only this," said Philip, laying a hand on her bridle rein, "that your father lived a wild life, in wild countries, and that he met a brave man's end at last. And I can give you this comfort, Joan. That story will never be made known. It is locked away; a secret for good and all."

"But it is impossible!" exclaimed Joan. "Things cannot be hushed up, officially, in this country?"

"You are mistaken," said Philip quietly. "It can be done, and was done in this case. I may mention no names, but one high in authority made that very decision. It was said in effect: 'William Tallbois is dead. Guilty or innocent, he has gone before a higher Judge. To drag up this story now will only throw a stain upon an honoured name—a name that has always stood high in England. Also it would cause pain to an innocent lady, and perhaps cloud her life. So the secret of William Tallbois shall remain locked away.' That was the decision. Make your mind easy, Joan; Lady Tallbois of Knayth has nothing to fear from that source. And no one else knows."

Joan bowed her head.

"The three judges who tried your case were made aware of it. I was consulted. Had it been necessary for establishing your rights, the whole story would have had to come out. But it was not necessary, and

having been warned, I was able to steer clear of it, Joan."

"I understand," she said softly. "How good you have always been to me, and how much I owe you!"

"I think you know there is nothing I would not do for you. Forget it then, Joan, and do not let it grieve you."

"I have no such feeling," said Joan. "My father was my father, and loyalty is the first of my creeds. We need speak no more of it. Shall we turn back now, Philip?" She reined in her horse. "My guests will be arriving soon, and I suppose I ought to be there."

Over the final slope homeward through the park Joan extended the mare to a full gallop. They flew along at racing speed, and when the girl at last slowed to a walk on nearing the Abbey her cheeks were glowing and her eyes shone like stars.

"That was glorious!" she cried.

"Yes, and rather risky, among those rabbit holes," said Philip. "You have a splendid nerve, Joan. Who is that fellow yonder? One of your retainers? Hardly that; he looks too seedy a customer."

Joan glanced at a remarkably tall stranger who was standing on the path leading to the stables. At once she was conscious that she had seen him somewhere before.

The man stepped forward, as if to intercept the riders. It was with a slight shock that Joan recognized him then for the tall tramp to whom she had given sixpence on the day of her first visit to Knayth. He was clean shaven now, however; the neat grey

beard was gone, yet there was no mistaking that lined face with its clearly cut features, and the deep, brooding eyes. Joan reined in the mare and halted.

The tall man took off his hat respectfully, and stood before her bareheaded.

"May I make a request, my lady?" he said gently.

"What is it?" replied Joan. Her eyes searched the stranger's face. There was a curious tingling in her veins.

"I am out of a place," said the tall man, "and I have hoped that your ladyship would give me employment on the staff of Knayth."

There was a pause. The man's attitude was humble, yet Joan was conscious of something strangely compelling about him. It occurred to her vaguely that the Abbey was badly in need of more help, with so many guests coming. Mr. Deane had said as much.

"I remember you," said Joan. "And you are seeking work—here?"

"If you please, my lady."

"How? In the gardens—the stables? Are you used to horses?"

"I have had experience with horses. But if there is room for me, I think, I could give your ladyship most satisfaction as a man-servant."

"A man-servant! Do you understand a footman's duties?"

"I am well acquainted, your ladyship," said the man gently, "with everything that concerns the service in a gentleman's house."

It came into Joan's mind that he would make a most impressive footman.

"You are somewhat altered since I last saw you," she said. "You wore a beard, I think."

"I have removed it, my lady, that I might have better hope of employment in this capacity."

"Your name?"

"John Goodenough, my lady."

"It has a dependable sound," said Joan smiling. "Well," she added with a sudden impulse, "I will engage you. Go to Mr. Deane, who has charge of everything, and tell him I wish you to be installed as footman. I daresay they will find a livery for you. We are short-handed."

"I thank your ladyship," said Goodenough with a most respectful bow, and drew back. Joan rode on her way, rather silent and pensive. Philip urged his horse alongside. He had listened to the conversation without making any comment, and he looked more amused than surprised.

"Do you think that was wise, dearest?" he said.

"Wise!" answered Joan. "I don't know. He is the first servant I have ever engaged. What has wisdom to do with it?"

"You are the most impulsive darling I ever knew," laughed Philip. "What a way to engage a footman! You know nothing about him, do you?"

"Not much, certainly. But I think he is honest. I like his face."

"Do you?' said Philip rather drily. "I should say it is the face of a man who has led a peculiarly chequered career."

"Well, so have I," smiled Joan, "so we ought to suit each other."

"Where have you seen him before?"

"The first day I ever came to Knayth, when I was a shilling tripper. I met him on the road, and he begged from me—though I hardly can call it begging. I gave him sixpence. The curious thing was that he refused half-a-crown, saying he did not want to rob me of so much." She described the rest of the incident as they rode into the garden.

"And that was before you ever knew of your inheritance, Joan?" asked Philip.

"Why, yes. I learned of it the very next day, in London."

Philip made no answer. He was silent and thoughtful until they had dismounted. The horses were taken by a groom, and Joan went up to her own quarters. She wondered why the face of the tall wayfarer had remained so persistently in her mind. Many a time she had thought of him since that first meeting; so much so that it was a slight shock to see him again. Still odder was it that in some way he had made her think again of "Uncle Jim," whose face, indeed, was no more than the dimmest half-memory of her childhood.

"I wonder if that is why I engaged him?" thought Joan, smiling. "If so, it was absurd of me; there is no resemblance really—even less than none, now that he has shaved his beard. I think I liked him better with his beard. But I suppose footmen can't wear them."

Joan splashed joyously in the marble bathroom adjoining her bed-chamber, and changed into a charming muslin frock. A little later she came down

to the hall, singing to herself; the new man-servant had passed out of her head. At the foot of the staircase, however, she met Mr. Deane, looking distinctly worried.

"About this man Goodenough, whom you required me to engage as a footman, Lady Tallbois," he said, "I have done so, of course. But do you know much about him—had he any references?"

"No," said Joan calmly. "I know nothing about references and I do not think they are ever much good. He seems to me just the man that is needed here."

"I cannot help feeling doubtful about it," murmured Mr. Deane.

"Why? Is he no use at his work?"

"Yes, as far as that goes," admitted Deane, "he seems to know his work particularly well, and Pond is very pleased with him."

"I wish the man to remain. I believe he will make a faithful servant, and I will be responsible for him."

"Your ladyship's word is law," said Mr. Deane with a bow, and he retired.

There was an influx of guests as the luncheon hour approached that swept all other matters aside. Never was there a happier or more intensely interested house-party; the usual dullness of such functions was wholly banished. A few people came from the surrounding county, the majority from town. The Ravelins, Fords, and General Sinkler arrived early. A telephone message was received from Harold Drummond, regretting that he could not arrive before ten.

Joan made a delightful hostess, and without the

faintest embarrassment. She had to undergo a new series of congratulations; her engagement to Philip was actually announced in that morning's *Post*, and added the final touch to a romance which appealed even to the most blasé. A match between the chatelaine of Knayth and the young barrister who had championed her cause!

Joan showed no reluctance to accept the felicitations now; she accepted them gladly and with pride—a pride in Philip which she expressed, with perfect tact, in such a manner as to give him the first place. One would have thought that she was the more favoured, the luckier of the two. But there was an undercurrent of envy in the congratulations of the younger men to Philip.

The afternoon passed swiftly and merrily enough. Joan had the true instinct of hospitality, and made no attempt to entertain or fuss over her guests. There was plenty of amusement for them; they split up into couples and explored, some played tennis, others rode; there was an eighteen-hole course on the park, in perfect order. Joan and Philip indulged in none of these things. They disappeared together, occupied with golden plans for the future.

The evening drew in, and Philip, having changed for dinner, came down twenty minutes ahead of time. As he descended to the hall a telegram arrived for him, and a letter. He took both into the empty morning room, opened the wire, and stood for some moments considering thoughtfully. He seated himself and dashed off a brief note; before it was finished he pressed the bell.

Goodenough, the new footman, appeared. A livery had been found for him, the Knayth uniform of dark green with brass buttons. It not only fitted him well, but set off his grave, sphinx-like features to perfection.

"Bring me a telegram form," said Philip, "and," he added, "a sherry and bitters."

"Very good, sir."

Goodenough returned silently, placed the tray on the desk and waited for orders. Philip scribbled a telegram, folded the form, and stamped the letter. Then the young barrister turned in his chair, and looked judgingly at the footman.

"It was a somewhat slight recommendation on which Lady Tallbois engaged you," he remarked.

"Yes, sir," said Goodenough respectfully.

"However it is to be presumed that you are an honest man?"

"Honest men are rare, sir," said the footman gravely, "but I trust that I am one."

Philip started slightly at the phrase. It recalled to him a curious memory. He looked at Goodenough's face, which was as immovable as stone.

"There is, I assume, no reason to think otherwise," said Philip quietly, and took up the glass.

"Is there anything else that I can do, sir?"

"No, thank you."

Goodenough bowed, and left the room. Mottisfont lit a cigarette and, crossing the hall, entrusted his telegram and letter to the butler for despatch; he then joined the guests assembling in the drawing-room. The gong sounded soon afterwards, and Joan

took her place as hostess to preside over her first dinner-party.

A merrier début could never have been made. There were fifteen at table, and Lady Dunluce had made her choice well; they were admirably assorted. The talk was bright, the dinner perfect, the old Pommery from the Knayth cellars was a dream. Joan herself did little more than sip at the frothing gold in her glass. The happiness in her heart needed no stimulant.

It was otherwise with old General Sinkler, who was silent at first, but after his third glass of champagne began to blossom out like a peony, as his custom was. A famous coursing man, General Sinkler loved to talk about his stud of greyhounds, and if he was not stopped in time, the subject was apt to become rather too vivid for the dinner-table.

"I believe I've got the winner of next year's Cup in Snowblossom," he called across the table to Philip. "She's a clinker, Mottisfont—bred her myself. Of course they say a good dog will always beat a good bitch, but I'm taking precautions——"

"Is it true that you're rebuilding your kennels, General?" broke in Philip hurriedly.

The General rose to this fly and was headed off for the moment. Lady Dunluce chuckled inwardly. The General tried to get back to Snowblossom, but just then young Lord Ravelin rose to his feet.

"Have I your permission, Lady Tallbois?" he said, smiling at Joan. "There is just one toast that we must drink."

Ravelin was that rare thing, a really good speaker. In a brief but very charming little speech he coupled the names of Joan and Philip, and expressed himself perfectly. Upstanding, the company received the toast with enthusiasm.

It was so well done that Joan flushed gratefully, her pleasure was complete. Before she could reply, General Sinkler began again.

"Gad, yes. It's delightful to see Knayth itself again, under so charming a hostess." He made a courtly little bow to Joan, and turning to a neighbour beside him added, in what was meant to be an undertone, but which carried round the table like a trumpet: "I remember poor Willie Tallbois well, before he went out. Glad he'd be now if he could know that a child of his reigned at Knayth."

"Yes?" murmured the neighbour nervously.

"A wonderful boy was Willie—but a mad streak in him," continued the General. "Went to smash. Queer life he must have led abroad. Wonder if we shall ever know it all? I met a fellow the other day who, since the case, is certain now that he met Tallbois once under another name. Deuced strange story. He told me——"

A silence that could have been felt suddenly descended upon the company. The General stopped. Even he realized for once that he had made a fool of himself. It was the last subject that should ever have been mentioned at Knayth. He saw Philip looking uneasy and angry.

"I beg pardon," murmured Sinkler in confusion. "I——"

"Do not apologize, General Sinkler!" said Joan in a clear voice.

The others glanced at her. Joan's chin was lifted, her cheeks coloured, and her eyes flashed brightly.

"It seems there are many strange stories about my father," said Joan, her gaze travelling slowly round the table. "They may be true or untrue; I neither know nor care. I am his daughter. I wish that he were living now, that he might take the place here that was his by right! I judge him by one thing only—that he was good to me, and I loved him!"

"Well done, Joan!" said the voice of Lady Dunluce.

There was an impressive stir among the company. For a moment no one spoke, but Lord Ravelin's eyes, slightly startled, were attracted by the tall footman who stood behind Joan's chair.

"What's the matter with that man?" murmured Ravelin. "He is ill."

Goodenough, his face deathly white, was swaying slightly, and his eyes were half closed. Mr. Pond, the butler, moved quickly towards him with an anxious frown; but Goodenough made the slightest deprecating gesture of his hand, recovered himself instantly, and stood to attention, motionless as a statue. Mr. Pond was relieved.

"Fill her ladyship's glass," whispered the butler curtly.

Goodenough obeyed like an automaton. The wine creamed gently into Joan's glass. There was the same flush on her cheek, the same strange light of defiance and command in her eye, as she rose to her feet.

"My guests," said Joan, "will you stand, please?"

The company stood up, turning towards her. There was the briefest pause as she raised her glass; a silence broken by Joan's clear voice.

"To my father's memory!"

CHAPTER XVIII

THE STRONGER HAND

BRIGHT starlight, a warm still air and the heavy scent of roses. The gardens of Knayth on a summer night seemed nearer to Paradise than this imperfect earth can match. Down the dark path beneath the pergolas, still roofed with late blossoms, came the shimmer of a silken dress, like some pale spectre of the Abbey. It was only Joan Tallbois wandering alone and pensive.

The women of the party had withdrawn, leaving the men at table—a prehistoric custom that Lady Dunluce despised, but which somehow seemed suited to Knayth. Joan had slipped away from her guests; she was in no mood for chatter; solitude and the water-garden beckoned to her.

The storm, which without apparent reason had lately swept through her spirit, calmed down as swiftly now in obedience to the hushed stillness that compassed her about. Joan was intensely sensitive to surroundings. Quiet and happiness returned. She stood still beside the roses, drinking in the fragrance of the night. A line of wonderful verse drifted through her mind as she heard the fountain's music, the dripping of the ferned grot—the veriest school of peace:

"And yet the fool
Contends that God is not—"

The words rose to Joan's lips, aloud and softly:

"Not God! in gardens! when the eve is cool?
Nay, but I have a sign:
'Tis very sure God walks in mine."

A long sigh escaped her. The next moment two arms stole around Joan and held her fast.

"Philip!" she murmured, "how silently you tread. Oh, no, you did not frighten me, dearest. I expected you, I think. Yes, I knew you would come."

She lifted her face to his.

"And I thought that I should find you here. I could not sit with the others," he said, kissing her tenderly. "And how is my dear one now? Easier in her mind? At peace again? You look more like yourself now, Joan."

"Did I shock everybody? I hardly remember what I said," Joan murmured. "People do not do such things, do they? Did you think me wicked, Philip?"

"I think you, and shall always think you, perfectly adorable," said Philip smiling. "No doubt you startled them a little. But people expect surprises from the Tallbois family. Who would have thought it of you, Joan? Why, you have a fierce little will of your own, with all your charm. There is courage in you, and determination!"

Joan felt she had very little of either. She looked at him wistfully.

"That is not what Englishmen admire in women, is it?" she said, "even if I were so—which I'm not."

Mottisfont laughed.

"You are thinking of the sweet Victorian girl," he said, with a comic shudder, "clinging—fainting—sickly; always in a muddle of some sort, and crying to be pulled out of it. Thank heaven girls are not like that now."

"You mean that the woman is not to be a drag on the man. That she shall be his equal partner?"

"Yes. No! I don't care what she is, so that she loves him." He pressed his lips to hers, and held her close.

"And I care less," whispered Joan. "You have named the only thing that counts, Philip."

"Then who so rich as we two?" He seated himself on a bench by the fountain and drew her beside him. "Dearest, my world grows more wonderful every day."

Joan's head rested against his shoulder.

"Do you know why I am glad Knayth is so beautiful, Philip?" she said. "It is because I can give it to you."

"But you cannot, beloved—and I am glad of it. You have given me your dear self. Our home may be at Knayth, or wherever you will. But I hold to my path—upward and onward, as far as in me lies. I've a man's work to do; you would not have me an idler?"

"How can there be any difference, Philip, between what is mine and what is yours? I want to help you."

"Then think, if you will, that you have helped me by freeing me from all care of gain or profit of the world's goods; is not that something? To you alone I dare confess that I aim very high; whatever honours I can win in the world, I will have them for your sake."

"Your love is my greatest honour, Philip. But I will show you that I can help! And you—you have lifted the only shadow that hung over us. Tell me, do you think I was foolish to refer to it; to say what I did just now before them all? I could not help it."

"Put all that from your mind, darling," said Philip quietly. "You are freed from it, it means nothing; it can never touch you now."

He bent over her, murmuring sweet, tender things that made Joan's heart flutter with delight. The hush of the night brooded over them like a canopy, the silence unbroken till the purr of a motor-car was heard, and a distant headlight flashed dimly in the avenue across the park.

"I wonder whose car that is," said Joan dreamily. And then she caught her breath, and glanced at the little watch on her wrist. It was just ten o'clock.

"I must go in, Philip!" she said. "There is something I have to do. Will you wait for me?"

Philip looked surprised. Before he could answer, she had flitted towards the house. A car was standing before the main entrance. Mr. Pond, the butler, was on the steps.

"A gentleman to see you, m'lady," he said. "I showed him into the gun-room, according to your instructions of this afternoon."

"Quite right," said Joan. Instead of going to the

gun-room, she made for the staircase, and at that moment John Goodenough came out of the lower corridor. She was struck by something strangely grim and sardonic in his usually sphinx-like face. Joan halted.

"Have you settled down to your duties, Goodenough?" she said pleasantly.

No footman could have bowed more correctly.

"I hope to perform all my duties adequately, my lady. If I may say so, I would rather serve at Knayth than at any house in England."

"Would you?" said Joan with a flash of sympathy. "Then we agree, Goodenough. You like your situation already then?"

Joan was very far from being above talking with her servants. She did so with the utmost simplicity and freedom from embarrassment. Goodenough attracted her strangely; his brooding eyes, though far from pleasing everybody, were to her remarkably compelling.

"I am very happy here," murmured the footman; "it is a pleasure to attend your ladyship."

His voice was most respectful. He had a way of gazing at her with a peculiar intentness, however, which was a little unusual in a footman.

"That is well," she said. "I like all people about me to be happy." She was moving away, but turned back again, and she hardly knew herself what impelled her to ask the next question.

"Did you happen to be in the room, Goodenough," she said, "when my guests rose in honour of the memory of my father?"

"I was serving your ladyship at the time."

"I thought so. Had things been different, Goodenough, you might now have been serving my father instead of me. I wish that it were so."

Goodenough bowed deeply.

"I should have endeavoured to serve his lordship with every fidelity to his comfort and his interests."

"I think you would." Joan checked herself, becoming aware that she was saying more than was necessary.

She went up to her room, and taking a wallet from a locked dressing-case that had come with her from London, Joan made for the gun-room, which contained no guns, but was a comfortably furnished panelled room on the ground-floor.

Mr. Norman Vaille was waiting. He bowed silently to Joan.

"Have you the original deed that I signed?" asked Joan quietly, "binding myself to pay you thirty thousand pounds?"

Vaille produced it. Joan scrutinized the paper carefully. It was undoubtedly the original. She laid bank-notes of the value of twenty thousand pounds on the table, and handed Vaille a written document.

"I require you to sign this receipt and deed," she said, "discharging me of all liability under your claim."

Mr. Vaille read the deed attentively, counted the notes, and signing the deed, handed it to Joan with a bow.

"Perfectly correct, Lady Tallbois," he said. He

packed the thick wad of notes inside his pocket-book.

"This ends all transactions between us, Mr. Vaille," said Joan icily.

Vaille did not permit himself to smile—he merely bowed again. Joan pressed the bell, and John Goodenough appeared.

"Show this gentleman out," said Joan.

Vaille walked to the door. For the first time his eyes rested on the footman's face. Vaille checked in his stride, and halted. His cheeks became bloodless as marble.

His back was turned to Joan, who perceived nothing unusual. The tall man-servant, impassive as a statue, looked straight before him as he held the door open for Mr. Vaille.

The visitor controlled his emotion quickly, and walked across the hall to the entrance. Goodenough followed, and silently opened the main doors for him. Mr. Vaille appeared to stumble a little as he passed out and got into his car.

At that moment Lady Dunluce came into the hall, and glancing through the entrance, saw the car whirr away down the drive, narrowly escaping an overturn at the corner, and vanish at surprising speed.

"Dear me!" she murmured, "a gentleman in a hurry. It has been a remarkable evening altogether. I feel my skin prinkling. Perhaps it is the weather."

"There is thunder in the air, m'lady," said the tall footman as he closed the doors, "and I think the storm is about to break."

Lady Dunluce stared.

"Extraordinary servants Joan engages!" she

thought. Lady Dunluce failed to realize that Romance stood at her elbow.

Goodenough passed with sedate stride to the lobby of the servants' quarters. Once there and alone, he became galvanized into amazingly rapid action. He slipped a serge jacket from a peg, exchanged it for his footman's coat in a twinkling, and darted out to the service garage, which was unlocked but in darkness. It contained two heavy estate motors and a powerful motor-bicycle, this latter the property of the head-gardener. The fact that the bicycle was not his did not deter Goodenough. Freeing the engine, he wheeled the machine out and ran it swiftly along the path through the shrubberies.

When well away from the house, Goodenough started the engine and sprang into the saddle. The machine flew forward with a bark and a roar. Reaching the bend, he wheeled deftly into the park road.

Far ahead, already almost at the gates of Knayth, the rear light of the retreating motor-car shone like a red spark. Goodenough opened his throttle, and the wind whistled past him. He threw up his head and laughed aloud, a deep, belling laugh like the bay of a hound. The statuesque expression that had suited him so admirably as a footman was gone. His grim face shone with the lust of the hunter.

The car had turned to the right at the park gates; Goodenough followed. The pace was not much over twenty miles an hour. When the motor-cycle had drawn up within three hundred yards of the car, the pursuer slowed, and did not attempt to go any nearer.

In this order they swept down the long hill and away over the levels of the Thames Valley.

The motorist took the main eastward road; clearly he was bound for London. He increased speed, and the cycle did the same, still preserving an equal distance. A mile and a half was covered over the deserted road.

Vaille, who was driving alone, peered round the hood and glanced back. Twice in a quarter of a mile he did this, for it was curious to find a lampless motor-cycle steadily following him. He realized quickly that Fate was at his heels. The highway forked a little way ahead, and here the car suddenly forsook the London road and switched up a side-turning that led south. The smile on Goodenough's face deepened as he did likewise.

Once more the man in the car glanced back. A piece of singularly reckless driving ensued. The car was let out to nearly fifty miles an hour in the narrow lane; the cycle, going its hardest, began to drop behind.

Goodenough kicked open the cut-off of the silencer and the cycle skimmed along with a roar like a maxim gun. He laughed again, for ahead the land rose to a gradient of one in eight where it led up through the slopes to Carfax Woods. Vaille had made an error of judgment.

The car took the rise bravely, but was not climber enough to take it in her stride. She had to drop into second speed. The cycle had her now well in hand, and was soon within a yard or two of her. There was no room to pass, and the hilltop was near.

Goodenough snatched out a small automatic pistol, and leaning forward at a range of a few feet, fired twice at the right rear wheel. The pistol spat flame, the first shot glanced, the second cut the tire, which collapsed straightway. Three more shots with a steady hand, and the left tire exploded with report like a shell. The car skidded, lurched violently, and drove its bonnet into the crackling hedge.

Goodenough leaped from the cycle and dashed to the front of the motor; Vaille, flung sideways by the shock, gave a choking gasp at the sight of his assailant and sprang up to defend himself. In an instant he was torn bodily out of the car as though he were a child rather than a twelve-stone man. His struggles were overborne by a paralysing grip on his throat; he found himself bent backwards across Goodenough's knee, staring upwards at the cruel eyes that glared into his. The stiffening went out of him, and his muscles relaxed.

Goodenough, holding him fast, tore open the overcoat and jacket, searching his pockets with a deft hand. The packet of bank-notes came to light. Goodenough flung the man from him across the driving-wheel, ripped open the packet, examined and pocketed it.

He glanced down with a sardonic smile at the limp figure of the motorist.

"Callaghan & Co. surpass themselves," he said, buttoning up his coat. "I begin to enter into my inheritance."

CHAPTER XIX

THE SECOND COUP

"My friends," said Mr. Callaghan, holding his glass of Burgundy to the light, "one of those intensely satisfying moments approaches, when intelligence and forethought ripen and bring their reward. Within half an hour our funds will be augmented by a further twenty thousand pounds."

"A generous welcome awaits Vaille," said Mr. Bell, laying his hands reverently on a magnum of Clos Vougeot that lay in its basket a little way from the fire. "Let us hope he will not be long, for the temperature of this admirable vintage is at present perfect. His lateness makes me a little uneasy."

"We can rely on Vaille," said Mr. Callaghan, "absolutely and with confidence." He looked at his companions, and the silver-rimmed spectacles shone glassily. "Is it not a triumph to reflect, my friends, that we can all, under any circumstances, rely on each other? That not one of us can, or dares, fail his companions—for the best of reasons. Vaille—but that should be his ring."

The bell sounded faintly. Drummond was despatched to answer it, and in a few moments Vaille entered the room.

Dead silence fell upon the company. Vaille's

appearance horrified them. His face was mottled and ghastly, his driving overcoat torn, and marked with mud. He looked dazed, and his lips moved without uttering any intelligible sound.

"What is this masquerade, Vaille?" said Callaghan, rising slowly to his feet. "Where is the money?"

"In Jim Carey's hands!" said Vaille.

The eyes behind Mr. Callaghan's spectacles turned a dull slaty colour.

"Carey," said Vaille, whose voice was hardly more than a husky croak, "has installed himself at Knayth as a footman—in a green coat and brass buttons. He is wise to the whole business. He followed me on a motor-cycle, shot up my tires, tore the wad of notes off me, and where he is now I cannot tell you. Don't look at me like that, Chief! Not you, nor the whole four of you, could have done as much to me!"

He threw back the collar of his overcoat; the print of livid finger-marks were about his neck.

"He is not a man, he is a devil! I've got his sign-manual on my throat. He'd have killed me then and there, like a dog, only that there were witnesses who had seen him pass on the roads—he'll do it yet. I don't know how I got back to town; I've been at my rooms nearly an hour. He just tore the stuff off me, and then threw me away like a burnt match."

Vaille collapsed into a chair.

"We have lost a fortune at his hands."

"A fortune!" stammered Mr. Bell, moving forward, "heavens and earth, man, do you not see that the loss of the money is the least part of this dis-

aster?" He looked round at his companions, and his dismay reflected itself in their faces. "That vengeful devil Carey is now master of twenty thousand pounds!"

Drummond nodded moodily, and glanced at Callaghan.

"Confess, Chief," he said quietly, "he has beaten you."

"Has he?" replied Callaghan with concentrated fury. "I will show you that. I will show you which of us two is the master."

The little alarm-bell on the wall buzzed suggestively. The four rose to their feet. But before Mr. Callaghan could move to investigate, the outer door in the passage was heard to open. The next moment there was a violent shock upon the door of the room itself, as though some powerful body had struck it; the heavy lock burst, and the door swung sharply inwards.

"The police," muttered Vaille, with a catch in his breath. Mr. Vaille was in error.

In through the doorway walked John Goodenough, the footman, cool, unruffled, with a faint, enquiring smile.

Quicker than light Callaghan's revolver was out and covered him. Vaille was hardly the fraction of a second slower. The two weapons converged unfalteringly upon the man, who was apparently unarmed. Bell darted behind, swung the door to, and set his back against it.

There was a moment's stupefied silence.

"Jim Carey!" gasped Drummond.

The visitor's eyebrows raised themselves slightly.

"Pardon me," he corrected, "Lord Tallbois of Knayth."

It was some moments before any one replied. With the exception of the newcomer, Mr. Callaghan was the most unmoved of the five. The wrath and bitterness he had shown previously were now entirely gone.

He had dropped into a chair, on the back of which his pistol hand rested with an unfaltering aim at his guest. One white finger hung lovingly on the trigger; the eyes that gleamed behind his spectacles showed an intense, epicurean satisfaction.

"Do you insist on that title?" he asked suavely.

The mockery that lurked about the intruder's lips deepened a little.

"No," he said, "it was merely a reminder of the situation. I seemed to detect an undue familiarity in your henchman's form of address. To you, however, I am still James Carey—omitting the bourgeois prefix."

"In a few moments," said Mr. Callaghan smoothly, "you will be the late James Carey. That I promise you most faithfully."

"I think not," said Carey. "However, it is precisely to test that matter that I am here. There is just a chance that you are right."

"It is an absolute certainty. Whatever your motive in coming to this house, you will not leave it alive. It is the opportunity we desired, and we are prepared for it."

"It would seem so," said Carey easily. "The

trifling sum of money I took from your fatuous messenger is not upon me, and I am quite unarmed. I have no coadjutors. Nobody knows that I am here."

Bell, Drummond, and Vaille, the third still backing Callaghan with his pistol, listened in eager silence, none of them attempting to interrupt. They felt that they were assisting at a colloquy between two giants.

"I am fully aware," said Carey, "that in this house you could kill me and dispose of my body without any difficulty. And with safety to yourselves, in my case, as far as the police are concerned. And yet, my good Callaghan," he added with a lazy smile, "I perceive that you hesitate!"

"It is not to be called hesitation," returned Callaghan calmly; "the position pleases me, and I wished to hear if you had anything of interest to say before I close it. I have only to press the trigger, and I have never missed in my life."

"Press it then," said the other carelessly, "and be hanged."

He thrust his hands deliberately into the pockets of his jacket, producing first a pouch, and then a pipe, which he proceeded to fill and light. His tapered fingers, mobile and strong as wire, shielded the match, and he grinned sardonically at Callaghan into whose eyes had crept a lurking doubt.

"And that," said Carey, "is not a figure of speech, but is literally accurate. If you kill me, you will be hanged. Not by any means, however, for the comparatively venial offence of shooting me. My

worthy Callaghan, you have some intelligence. You do not suppose I am such a fool as to walk into this den without having made my little arrangements."

He scanned the faces of the partners with an air of amusement.

"If anything happens to me tonight the records of all of you, your headquarters, your association with one another, and your connection with a series of interesting operations that have long occupied the attention of the police; all these will reach the proper authorities." Lord Tallbois chuckled appreciatively. "You are admirably camouflaged, but I, you see, am the weak spot in your reckoning. I am the only person alive who could give you away. My revelations would be something of a bomb-shell. You, my excellent Callaghan, would inevitably make the acquaintance of the rope, and if you had three necks, like the Hydra of the Iliad, they would all be forfeit. And unless I arrive back at my humble quarters before the eight o'clock postal delivery in the morning, you will account for it in full."

He took the pipe from his lips and contemptuously ejected a stream of smoke into Callaghan's face, enveloping him in a thick haze.

"Shoot, Mr. Callaghan," he said ironically. "I am a large mark. You can hardly miss me."

Mr. Callaghan's usually immobile face twitched a little. He stared at Carey, and slowly lowered the barrel of his pistol.

"It does appear," he admitted, "that this is something of an impasse."

"It is a deadlock," replied Carey. "So far from

securing your own safety by killing me you will destroy yourselves. And I, too, cannot give you away without betraying James Carey."

"What, then, was your object in coming here?" said Callaghan.

"I considered it was time we should face each other and clear the air. Having laid my plans and delivered myself to you unarmed, I wished to see whether you would have the p'uck to kill me. It seemed to me quite possible," said Carey quietly, "and not undesirable. A clean sweep of the whole five of us. That, on the whole, might be the best thing—for Lady Tallbois of Knayth."

His brooding eyes considered the four men thoughtfully.

"I almost hoped for it, Callaghan. But you were bluffing, as usual. You have a pitiful propensity to bluff. It is a thing I never do myself. When I raise the limit I've always got the cards. I hold them now. And so your pistol is useless."

"What is it you want?" exclaimed Callaghan impatiently. "Are you here then to join forces with us again—to come to an understanding?" There was a note of hope in his voice. "Why not? It might be managed, Carey!"

The tall man's eyes narrowed with inexpressible scorn.

"I would as soon join forces," he said quietly, "with a pack of *canaille* from the gutter. When I had the honour to lead this coterie it was efficient and it was loyal. You believed me dead, therefore you thought fit to single out my daughter and make her

life a hell on earth, that you might profit. For that," said Lord Tallbois icily, "there can be neither truce nor forgiveness. You were all frightened over the hanging of Robert Mardyke—a man worth twenty such as you. You imagined the torture and blackmailing of a defenceless woman would be a much safer refuge. Instead, it is by far the most perilous enterprise on which you ever embarked. But my time here is up."

His face cleared, and the mocking smile returned to his lips.

"At this point, since the game is now in my hands, I must express a certain gratitude to you all. You really did collect the proofs very capably and install Lady Tallbois in her rights—a task that for me was obviously fraught with great difficulties, though you charged a somewhat exorbitant fee. Your attempt to levy blackmail on the strength of my past record was clumsy; however, as the entire sum remains in my hands, I will make no further comment, save to express my obligation. The money," he said blandly, "remains in the family. I have ensured that you will not repeat that attempt. It appears, then, that you have played your cards out; the honours rest with me, and having thus cleared the stage I will leave you to your reflections and return to my duties."

A faint sigh of relief escaped the partners. It was Drummond who first spoke.

"I think, Tallbois, you should certainly delay no longer," he said, "or you will find yourself disciplined by the Knayth butler."

Lord Tallbois smiled appreciatively.

"Thank you, Harold," he said, "there was always a gleam of humour in you. I gather that Callaghan is in the habit of addressing his confederates as 'gentlemen.' He is scarcely a competent judge; you are the only one of them that had originally the slightest claim to that title, though you have very little backbone. I am on the best of terms, you will be glad to hear, with the butler; my temporary absence will be forgiven. And now, 'gentlemen,' I make you my adieux. You have appointed yourselves lictors to the Tallbois family—but *Quis custodes custodiet ipsos?* Drummond will construe that for you, and give you the answer. I recommend to you the more commonplace pathways of crime."

He bowed ironically to the company, and walked out through the doorway from which Mr. Bell hastily withdrew. His tall figure disappeared down the passage.

Not till the footfalls had died away and Carey had been gone for fully two minutes, did any of the company move or speak. Then the three junior partners turned moody eyes upon Mr. Callaghan.

To their surprise, he was smiling. It was not a pleasant smile, for it laid bare the fang-like canine teeth at the corners of his mouth, but it was quite genuine and unforced. It increased until he was shaking all over with merriment.

"Really!" he said, "it is entertaining. Carey believes, or pretends he believes, that a crisis has been marked, the game is his, and the firm of Callaghan beaten. But the real blow has yet to fall. Within twenty-four hours that human gold-

reef, Lady Tallbois, and her ineffable father, will be delivered into the crushing-mill." He turned in his seat. "For now we play the third coup, my friends —the third coup!"

A flash of expectation came into Bell's eyes. Mr. Callaghan rose, and taking down the portrait of James Carey that had so long hung over the mantelpiece, he dropped it into the fire and pressed it down with the poker so that the flames caught it. He then faced his companions, polished his spectacles, replaced them, and beamed at Mr. Bell.

"Joan Tallbois," he said, "has no more right to the estates and title of Knayth than I have!"

The three others stared at him as if doubting whether they had heard aright. They drew nearer to their leader.

"Strange, is it not?" said Callaghan gently, "that the House of Lords and the Bar of England should so fall into error? Not that they really blundered. No, no! The evidence was genuine, the finding of the Court was just. Joan is William Tallbois' daughter. Unfortunately for her—there is another, and an elder daughter."

"You say that Joan has a sister!" cried Vaille.

"Well," replied Mr. Callaghan, rubbing his hands, "er—a half-sister, gentlemen."

"You mean that Carey married twice!"

"Twice?" echoed Callaghan blandly. "I should say half a dozen times, to my knowledge. Marriage was a recurring habit of his. He thought no more of the contract, Vaille, than you would of buying a packet of cigarettes. It is sad to reflect on such

depravity. Yet if you study the newspapers you will find there are many men of the type who could easily surpass Slim Jim's record."

Vaille drew a deep breath.

"Yes," said Callaghan, "that suave, supercilious devil who stood here before us and valued his life at no more than a pin's purchase had a wonderful way with women. Yet one strange fact stands out. It really seems that his marriage with Helen Lloyd was the only one that held him, and that after her death her daughter was the only living creature for whom he cared. Who shall account for the workings of the human mind—especially such a mind as Slim Jim's?"

"But if this other marriage was later?" exclaimed Drummond.

"Earlier," corrected Mr. Callaghan suavely, "else how would it affect us? Listen. In the Spanish church at Punta Arenas, South Florida, on January 30, 1898, and barely a month after his first landing in America—William Tallbois took to wife Mercedes De Castra, a Spanish half-breed woman, at that time no doubt of singular beauty. He deserted her after four months, and from that day, so far as I know, has never concerned himself with her existence. She and her daughter Agnes—rightfully and legally Agnes Tallbois—were deprived of a worthy husband and father. That, gentlemen, is a little piece of Mexican Gulf history which the evidence before the House of Lords did not bring to light!"

The news struck the rest of the brethren speechless.

"Later, as we know very well, Tallbois married Helen Lloyd at Calcarth," concluded Callaghan.

"And his first wife—this woman De Castra—was alive at the time?" cried Drummond.

"Of course she was," replied Callaghan coolly. "She is alive now, and her daughter, too. At this moment they are both crossing the Atlantic in the S. S. *Livadia*—and I expect to meet them at Southampton in the morning."

This statement caused stupefaction.

"Then have you only lately discovered this extraordinary affair?" Drummond exclaimed.

Mr. Callaghan chuckled.

"How simple you are, Drummond. I have known it from the first. I spent eighteen months in the Southern States tracing and completing what I knew of Slim Jim's career. In my campaign here I have naturally put the cart before the horse—Joan to the front before Agnes De Castra—because in no other way could we so effectually tap the Knayth gold-chests. Our trump card is now Agnes and her somewhat dusky mother. Do you perceive?"

"It is colossal—masterly!" said Vaille with deep admiration. "How did you contrive to keep this ace up your sleeve, Chief? The marriage of Tallbois with Helen Lloyd then, was no marriage!"

"None at all. Joan has no claim in law to either money or title, and only a courtesy right to the name of Tallbois. It is unfortunate for her, but you will call to mind a text beginning: 'The sins of the fathers—'? It has more truth in it probably than our friend Carey's Latin quotation, which I confess, not being a public-school man, I did not understand. But I can tell you that Joan is a waif and a beggar."

"And this can be proved?" said Bell quickly.

"Easily. It is a much simpler case than Joan's was. She succeeded because this first marriage was wholly unsuspected. Once brought forward it can be proved immediately."

"And if Joan Tallbois fights? She has power and money."

"They cannot stand against the simple fact—the truth. She would not have a ghost of a chance."

"This Spanish woman and her daughter?" said Vaille. "They know, then, of their claim?"

"Not yet," smiled Mr. Callaghan. "They are coming here on my initiative and at my expense—I am financing them. Money means a good deal to them—they are very poor, and I fear, not particularly honest. The girl thinks she is going on the stage here. She can sing. And I think she will afford you much amusement, my friends."

Vaille whistled.

"Jim Carey, then?" he said; "does *he* not know that these curious belongings of his still exist?"

"I should judge not. But that I am unable to say with certainty. Who can tell what Slim Jim knows? But if not he will not remain long in ignorance now. His legal wife will land in England tomorrow; her daughter Agnes with her—the true and rightful Viscountess Tallbois of Knayth."

Mr. Callaghan threw back his massive head and laughed with frank enjoyment.

"I wish, my friends, you could see that pair at the moment!" he chuckled, "and observe what a shock may be in store for Mayfair Society and the English

peerage. The elder woman is now a fat nonentity. But the daughter, who has a strong dash of colour in her, is a little she-devil, beautiful in her way, with the temper and the soul of a rattlesnake."

"But look here, Chief," said Drummond eagerly, "how have you worked the thing? What name did Carey marry under? How is it possible these two people will not know?"

Callaghan checked him with a raised hand.

"Enough for the present," he said. "All these things will be made clear as the action unfolds itself. What we have to do now is to get busy, for time is short."

He held up a finger.

"First," he said impressively, "Joan Tallbois is to be informed. She will be given the chance to purchase her own security, and remain in power! The price will be a great one—half the income of Knayth. If she surrenders and decides to pay, then we shall hold her safe from the half-caste girl."

"Can you do that!" said Vaille. "Can you hold down the mother and the daughter?"

"Trust me," said Callaghan quietly. "I can do it. And if we have to install the worthy Agnes at Knayth, we shall still secure our profit. I've got her faster than ever I had Joan."

"Chief," said Mr. Bell, breathing hard, "I acclaim you! For a few minutes today I thought Carey the greater man. But you have genius!"

Callaghan disregarded him.

"If Joan refuses," he said, "she sinks in one day from the castle to the gutter. She falls a hundred

fathoms lower than when she was Joan Ayre, the typist. Title, wealth, position—and lover; all lost at a single blow. For," he said with a slow smile, "the ambitious and immaculate Mottisfont, K.C., will certainly withdraw from alliance with a nameless waif, whose only dowry is the shame of the bar sinister."

"You think she will accept the terms?" said Bell.

"I think she will accept," answered Callaghan with confidence. "She is intensely in love with this man; her life is wholly wrapped up in him. When a woman is very much in love, seeing that love threatened with disaster, her notions of strict honour are apt to fade—if she has them. And we've to remember—she is Slim Jim's daughter."

"She is Slim Jim's daughter," echoed Drummond, his face falling. "We are not likely to forget it. What will Carey's answer be to this? How will he strike at us, when he knows?"

"Let him!" returned Callaghan sharply. "I can counter him. Whatever happens, it is war to the knife. His hands are tied by this; I shall have the whip-hand of him. I say this thing must go forward!" His eyes glinted fiercely as he looked round. "If any one of you is afraid, let him back out now!"

The partners sought each other's eyes. A nod of agreement passed.

"We must hold together," said Vaille. "We have no choice. I will carry out your orders, Chief, for this coup is too great to fail."

"So be it," said Callaghan. "On her return to London, Joan Tallbois receives the ultimatum."

CHAPTER XX

THE FINAL OFFER

FIVE days later Joan regretfully abandoned Knayth and its staff for a necessary twenty-four hours in town. She entered her house in Grosvenor Square the next morning after an expedition to Bond Street. Joan arrived in high spirits, which were immediately dashed by an announcement from her rather obtuse butler.

"A Mr. Vaille is here, my lady," he said. "He informed me your ladyship's orders were that he was to await your return if you were out, and I showed him into the morning-room."

Joan flushed with anger and indignation. That Mr. Vaille, after her previous dismissal of him, should gain admittance to her house by a deliberate lie, roused her very thoroughly. A suspicion of the butler himself also entered her mind; she glanced at him keenly, but suppressed the remark that was on the tip of her tongue and walked quickly across to the morning-room. Mr. Vaille was there, perfectly groomed as ever.

"What brings you to my house?" said Joan very curtly. "I told you——"

"Lady Tallbois," said Mr. Vaille in a low voice "accept my apology. But a crisis has arisen, so

serious that you should be informed at once. You honourably discharged your liability to me. And now I only regret, for your sake, that I gave you the evidence that placed you where you are. It was genuine evidence. I could not foresee the disaster that now overtakes you."

"You are playing with words!" broke in Joan impatiently. "What disaster?"

"That fact," said Vaille quietly, "which, failing drastic action, will in a few days be known to everybody. That you are not Lady Tallbois. That you have no rights in the title and estates of Knayth. That there is another claimant who will take from you all that you believed to be yours."

Very slowly the colour faded from Joan's face. She could not credit her senses. Was the man in his right mind?

"It is hard for me to say this to you," said Vaille, averting his face. "I must, however, put it brutally and briefly, that you may understand. Your father, William Tallbois, married Mercedes De Castra at a place called Puntas Arenas, Florida, in 1898. He deserted her after a few months. When he married Helen Lloyd his legal wife was still alive. That second marriage was no marriage. His only legitimate daughter is Agnes De Castra Tallbois, the child of his wife Mercedes. She is Viscountess Tallbois of Knayth. This most unfortunate truth, which your law-suit did not reveal, has only now come to light."

Joan looked at him steadily, and for some moments was silent. When at last she spoke, her voice was unnaturally cold and calm.

"For a long time past," she said, "I seem to have been enveloped in a web of lies. This, I suppose, is another."

Quietly though she spoke, a deadly conviction already crept into her mind, that whatever falsehoods had been spoken in the past, this at last was the truth.

"It is plain fact," answered Vaille. "Absolute, final, and unanswerable. The woman is now in England, and no public action at law can defeat her claim. Name, title, and money, are all hers, and she has only to make them good."

Joan took two or three steps away from him; suddenly her knees seemed to give way under her, and she sank into a chair. She did not look at Vaille.

Evil news, according to its purport, may drive the recipient to grief, to rage, or to despair. But this blow was so deadly and involved so complete a downfall, that Joan's emotion appeared exhausted. She was extraordinarily calm and unresponsive. Thus it is that some women receive the death sentence.

It was difficult for a few moments to realize fully what it meant to her. And Vaille was still speaking, explaining, making it clear. Joan only heard a mist of confused words. She heard him as one hears people talking in a nightmare. And yet she believed the main fact he had told her was true. It was absurd to suppose he had come there merely to lie.

"I am infinitely sorry," murmured Vaille. "I could do nothing but warn you."

Position—wealth—title—all these, she saw, were swept away at a blow. The right to bear a name.

And they meant very little. There was one overshadowing tragedy she foresaw. Philip . . .

She put a trembling hand over her heart.

"There is a way out," she heard Vaille's voice saying very softly. "Money will save you yet."

She turned to him slowly. A gleam of hope came into her eyes.

"What do you mean?"

"I mean that it is possible for you to buy off this claim. I will undertake it for you if you entrust it to me."

Joan stared blankly.

"I will ensure your safety!" said Vaille, leaning forward and speaking very distinctly. "You may remain at Knayth and enjoy all that you now hold. It will cost you—half the income of Knayth yearly. But is not that better than to lose all? Never mind the means; I will make that clear to you when you have consented. Today I can prevent your rival from entering the field against you. Tomorrow it will be too late."

"You tell me," said Joan dazedly, "that you can do this."

"Madam," replied Vaille, "I never promise what I cannot perform. I say I can bring this about, just as surely as I brought about your establishment in your present position. I will give you every proof that what I say is true. I can leave you in possession, in the eyes of the world, as Lady Tallbois of Knayth."

Joan could only sit and stare at him.

"I wonder," she said slowly, "how you dare to

come to me with this proposal—and put yourself in my power!"

"Not at all," replied Vaille with perfect confidence. "I am offering you a private financial compromise which you can take or leave as you choose. If you accept, you are bound to secrecy. If you refuse, you may shout it from the house-tops if you like. No one will believe you, nor will it affect me if they do. But you, Lady Tallbois, will retire from the world of Mayfair into the unknown—outcast, nameless, and a pauper." His voice dropped to an insinuating whisper. "Why should you? Why should you?—when a word will save you?"

Suddenly Joan felt herself begin to tremble violently. Every hope that life held was being snatched from her hands. It meant, surely and inexorably, the loss of her lover. What claim had she on Philip now? She had no right even to her father's name. Wealth and honour were swept away; nothing was left but a heritage of shame. It was a horror too deep for tears.

And this suave, efficient adventurer before her, pointed the way out. She believed his story; she believed he could do what he promised. How, she did not know, but likely enough there was safety for her in this bargain with the powers of darkness, if the price was paid.

Her lips tightened, and she fought with herself. Vaille, who was watching her like a cat, spoke just as she was wavering.

"Your future—your happiness?" he said softly. "Will you fling these away with both hands, rather

than say the word? I can save them for you. Is there only yourself to think of?"

Joan felt a stab of agony that was like a knife turning in a wound. Her hands opened and clenched; suddenly she crossed the room and came close to Vaille.

"Half the income of Knayth?" she whispered. "Is that the price—to leave me as I am?"

"Half," replied Vaille quickly. "Thirty thousand pounds a year. It will still leave you a rich woman. You are not asked to make a bargain in the dark—you shall have every safeguard. On our part we shall make it a certainty for you, since if we ever fail we shall lose our pay. We will not fail."

Joan stood silent. Her bosom rose and fell painfully. There was a strange, almost dangerous gleam in her eyes. Vaille, as he watched her felt a thrill of triumph. He saw that she was yielding; that the game was his.

With a swift impulse she turned upon him, so abruptly that he almost shrank back.

"No!" said Joan hoarsely. "The answer is no! If this is true let the girl take the rights that are hers by law! Should the claim be just, I will not even fight her in the courts! She is my father's daughter."

Vaille started up, but before he could speak she pressed the bell.

"As for you," she said, "I concede you this much. Since you have seen me in a moment of weakness, I shall hold my peace as to this infamous offer. My humiliation is complete. But I will surrender to the heiress of the Tallbois, and not to adventurers! It is finished."

The butler opened the door.

"Show this man out," said Joan.

Vaille turned to go. Again Joan addressed the servant.

"Should he ever present himself again," she said, "you will give him in charge of the police as a blackmailer, at my order, and instantly communicate with me. You understand?"

"Y—yes m'lady," said the startled butler.

Vaille preserved his composure. He bowed deeply to Joan, and passed out. In another minute the front door clanged behind him.

Joan dropped upon a sofa and pressed her hands to her burning temples. She tried to think, but the horror of it all was almost too much to grasp. After a long pause she collected her faculties with an effort of will and went into the room where stood the telephone.

There was only one thing to do. Advice must be sought immediately, and the truth made clear. She rang up Philip's chambers, and the reply was some time in coming. She did not recognize the voice that answered.

"Mr. Mottisfont 'phoned from the courts directing his servant to pack a bag and bring it to King's Cross. Neither of them have returned; I think Mr. Mottisfont caught the Northern express. He left no address, but will probably telephone or wire it. Will you leave a message, or ring up again?"

Joan hung up the receiver and sat rigid, staring before her with dry eyes. The thought flashed instantly into her mind—Vaille was not the first to

glean news of her coming downfall. In the courts, doubtless, more than an inkling of it was already known. Philip Mottisfont, in the hour of her direst need, was not at hand.

Was Philip the first to desert the sinking ship?

CHAPTER XXI

A DAUGHTER OF THE SUN

MR. CALLAGHAN rolled an excellent cigar appreciatively between his lips, and watched the landscape of Hampshire speeding past the carriage windows. "You have not so far impressed us as being what one would call a marrying man, my dear Drummond," he said pensively.

"Well, hardly," replied Drummond, without looking up from the *Sporting Times*. The two of them were sharing an otherwise empty first-class compartment in the Southampton train. "Why?"

"It will be a pleasant change for you," said Mr. Callaghan reflectively.

"Eh!" exclaimed Drummond, dropping his paper. He saw the silver-rimmed spectacles regarding him benignantly, yet with a certain cold determination. He became uneasy.

"I hope," said Mr. Callaghan, "that you will soon be entering the blissful state of matrimony, Drummond."

"Good heavens, Chief! What are you talking about?" gasped the young man.

"With the Señorita Agnes De Castra Tallbois, daughter of William and Mercedes of that ilk," pursued Callaghan, placing his finger-tips together. "She would make you an excellent wife."

Drummond gazed at him in unaffected horror.

"By all I've heard of her from you, I'd sooner shoot myself!" he said dizzily.

"Come, come," said Mr. Callaghan. "A little coyness is, of course, natural in one so young, but you really put the matter too strongly. A peeress of England, with sixty thousand pounds a year! Does not that counterbalance a little crudity of temper and a strong dash of Spanish blood—with perhaps a tinge of African? The young lady is really an excellent *parti*."

"But my dear Chief, how on earth——"

"You are quite a personable young man," interrupted Mr. Callaghan, regarding Drummond critically. "Decidedly good-looking. And you are fair-haired (that crisp, curling gold is very attractive, Drummond) and blue eyed; while she is—er—rather dark. It augurs well. Then you are well-born, and have the entree of the best social circles, which will be a decided advantage. Yes, I foresee a very happy union."

Drummond drew a long breath, and eyed his companion with consternation.

"What an excellent thing for your friends, too," purred Mr. Callaghan. "Knayth would, indeed, be our milch-cow. We should not be hard on you, my dear fellow. After we had drawn our dividends, and a small bonus from yourself, there would still be plenty left for you. Don't look at me so coldly. Such things are not to be picked up by the wayside. Isn't sixty thousand pounds a year good enough for you, and the mastership of Knayth?"

'Yes, it is," said Drummond, after a pause. "I should be a fool to miss such a chance. But is it a chance at all, Chief? You are talking as if it was a certainty!"

"No, it is not a certainty. It is merely a tender hope I cherish," said Mr. Callaghan, beaming at him amiably. "You will be thrown together with this delightful young lady, and I hope for a happy outcome, ending in orange-blossoms and Mendelssohn's music. It is not an essential part of my plans, but it would round everything off most admirably. I feel most sentimental today; already as in a vision I see you leading the charming Agnes to the altar. You must put forth your best efforts."

"What, at once?"

"No, no, of course not. When she is in full possession—assuming that we place her on the throne. I don't gamble, Drummond, I play for certainties, and I would not dream of landing you with a possible fiasco. You must be first in the field, that is all."

"You forget one little drawback, even if it came off," said Drummond, looking somewhat disconsolate. "The pleasure of having Slim Jim for a father-in-law."

"I do not forget it at all. You would be no worse off than you are now, and sixty thousand pounds better. Jim Carey will hardly be so tactless as to murder his own son-in-law. You would be the safest of the party, and already he is well-disposed to you. Last night you were the only one of us of whom he spoke well," said Mr. Callaghan blandly. "He will

doubtless fall on your neck, and give you his blessing."

"Vaille had Carey's hands round his neck once," replied Drummond with a shiver, "and I am not exactly pining for any caresses of that sort."

"Do not damp me with these frivolous objections," said Mr. Callaghan. "I am the messenger of Hymen, and on thinking it over, you will see that I speak for your good." He darted a keen glance at his companion. "You will obey orders, Drummond."

Drummond looked silently at the man opposite him. He recognized the cold, deadly egotism that lurked behind those gold spectacles; the extraordinary driving force and pitilessness of him who played with his associates as though they were pawns on a chess-board.

"I suppose I shall obey," said Drummond, with a sigh, "but these things are on the knees of the gods. Don't let us meet trouble before it comes. And as we shall be meeting the genuine Tallbois claimant and her mother in half an hour, you must prepare me by giving certain information that you have so far held back."

"What do you want to know?" asked Callaghan.

"In the first place, under what name did Slim Jim marry this Spanish woman? His own?"

"Under the name of Le Mesurier," replied the Chief.

"Humph. But will not that make proof of the claim more difficult?"

"On the contrary, easier. William Tallbois' identity with Le Mesurier has already been well established. The claim, I tell you, is a walk-over."

"Is it not strange, Chief, that this woman and her daughter have not heard about Le Mesurier and become 'wise'? The Tallbois case made a big noise here, and even abroad. In any event, won't they tumble to it now—perhaps before you want them to?"

"For a year past," replied Callaghan calmly, "they have been living in an obscure village in Florida, and I know they have heard nothing about it. For what they may hear in England—well, one must take a little risk, and it matters the less because I shall get busy at once. Believe me, I have them under a most effective thumb."

"I can believe that. What does the woman call herself now?"

"She calls herself by her former name, De Castra. She seems to have acquired a decided dislike to the memory and name of the husband who deserted her after a few months, and whom she has long believed dead. It is a custom among the Spanish races to combine surnames on marriage, you know. The daughter was raised in the Eastern States as a singer and dancer in third-rate joints; she can talk Spanish, but her natural speech is of the Bowery. Any more fool questions to ask, Drummond? Thank goodness for that. You know all you need, and here is Southampton."

The train slid to a standstill and they got out.

"Now," said Mr. Callaghan, "I am going to the South Western Hotel here at the station, and you, Drummond, will go across to the docks and meet the *Livadia;* she is a day late, but was signalled off the Lizard this morning, and will come in on this tide—

you should just catch her. I don't want to appear on her myself. Find Señora De Castra and her daughter, which you will do without any difficulty, and bring them to the hotel."

Drummond departed obediently on his errand, and found that the time had been run rather fine—the liner was even then coming into her berth at the quay. He had secured a taxi, which he ordered to wait, and as soon as he was able to board the steamer he contrived to get hold of a busy purser who had just come on deck, and enquired for Mrs. De Castra. Did he know such a name on his passenger list?

"I should say so! That's her, standing by the hatchway," replied the purser hurriedly passing on, and Drummond approached the figure that was pointed out to him.

The woman was unlike anything he had imagined. Once, perhaps, she had been handsome. Now she was common-place, fat, with two chins and a complexion of the same tint as a banana skin. She waddled in her walk, wore a good deal of black lace, and there was a curious, pathetic look in her eyes.

"Mrs. De Castra?" asked Drummond, raising his hat.

"*Si, si!*" said the woman eagerly, turning to him, "it is my name. And you?"

"Drummond, at your service," said the young man. "At the South Western Hotel we shall find a friend of mine who has just arrived there—Mr. Callaghan."

It seemed to him that the woman winced at the name.

"*Esta bueno,*" she said, "perhaps you vill show us de vay. Here comes my daughter. Agnes, *carità!* Let me present to you a friend, the Señor Drummond."

A girl who had just come up the hatchway turned in answer to the call, and Drummond felt a decided shock as he looked Agnes De Castra Tallbois in the face.

She was slim and of the middle height, with the boneless suppleness and grace of the Latin races. The girl was undeniably beautiful, but her skin was a dark olive, her lips very red and curved, with slightly cruel lines at the corners. Her dress was showy and tawdry, her whole appearance and manner exotic.

She looked at Drummond with a bold, flashing stare—a strangely defensive, searching look. Then she smiled, showing very white teeth. Drummond's pink and cream English skin seemed to please her.

"Got a cab here?" she said abruptly.

"Yes, I've a taxi waiting," said Drummond, rather startled.

"Then let's get a move on!" said the girl, with a strong East-side accent that contrasted oddly with her appearance, and had no trace of Spanish in it. "Have the baggage sent to the hotel."

The stout Señora De Castra seemed to take everything for granted. In another minute Drummond was seated opposite her and her daughter in the taxi, driving towards the dock gateway.

"Say!" exclaimed the girl, "I'm mighty glad to be quit of that shuck-heap of a steamer. Over a week cooped on her like a chicken in a picking-pen. Me

for the sidewalks and the glittering throng. What sort of money do the vaudeville houses play to here? Say, are you in the Profession?"

"In the—? Oh, no, I'm afraid I'm not. I'm an idle, useless sort of fellow, Miss De Castra," said Drummond smiling. "I only know the theatres from the wrong side of the footlights—the audience's side. But Callaghan's an old friend of mine; he'll be able to tell you more than I can."

Agnes De Castra looked him over, with a keenly appraising expression in her large black eyes. She noted his perfectly cut clothes, his well-groomed head, and his air of ease and self-possession. She set him down as a man-about-town, or in her own argot, a "high-flyer"; but of a different type from those she had known in the States.

Drummond, for his part, watched her unobtrusively and without seeming to do so, as he talked. He had never seen anybody like her. She was amazing. The contrast of her exotic southern beauty, with its touch of savagery, and the flowing city slang that suggested the down-town dancing saloons of the North, was puzzling, till he remembered what Callaghan had told him of her life.

She reminded him of some beautiful feline animal. Her suppleness and the tinge of a pink flush on her olive cheeks when she was stirred, were very attractive, and spoke of the Spanish and English intermixture. But the dark, opal-tinted half-moons at the base of her finger-nails, though less marked than those of her mother, spoke plainly of a tinge of African blood. Drummond, a well-travelled man,

knew the sign. In England she was white; in the Southern States she might have caused trouble if she boarded a white man's street-car.

And this was the heiress of the Tallbois—descendant of an ancient race, and daughter of the most ruthless criminal of his time. Slim Jim Carey had bequeathed a strange recruit to the English peerage!

Even her fat and placid mother seemed afraid of her.

The taxi drew up at the hotel, and Drummond marshalled his charges into the private sitting-room where Callaghan, urbane and smiling, rose impressively to receive them.

"Welcome to England, Señora!" he said, pressing the elder lady's plump yellow hand, and "your charming daughter. I had the pleasure of seeing her last in Chicago, before she returned to you in the South." He bowed low to Agnes. "I anticipate a triumph for you in England—though the way at first may be hard, but I have great influence."

"I do not wish that she appear on the stage here in her own name," pleaded the Señora, a little nervously.

"What's in a name?" quoted Mr. Callaghan. "A great deal, you may find, Miss Agnes. A great deal."

Drummond observed that the mother seemed to stand in decided awe of Callaghan, and that the girl herself regarded him with a sort of sullen, defensive watchfulness as if even she were a little afraid of him. It impressed Drummond more than ever with the capabilities of his leader.

"It desolates me that I was not there to meet you

both," said Mr. Callaghan, "but I am in indifferent health, and this east wind makes me feel very old and helpless." He polished his spectacles deprecatingly. "I trust I am forgiven?"

"Mr. Drummond has been very polite," said Agnes, with a glance at him.

"Ah, Drummond is always polite," replied Mr. Callaghan laughing, "and unlike most of his type, it is a politeness that comes from the heart. Drummond is a social butterfly, who moves among the elect, and needs neither to toil nor spin, whereas I am merely a man of business. I dare swear, Miss Agnes, that you have never met anybody quite like Drummond. But let us come down, as you would say, to brass tacks. Yes? Come in!"

There was a rap at the door, and a messenger appeared.

"Telegram, sir—name Callaghan."

Callaghan, excusing himself, opened it. The telegram was in code, but he had no difficulty in reading it without reference to the key.

Nothing doing with Joan. Her refusal is final. Do not think she will fight the case. The way is clear. —Vaille.

"There is no answer," said Callaghan quietly to the messenger boy. He folded the telegram carefully and slipped it into his vest pocket. The fleetest of glances at Drummond, and a faint shake of the head, acquainted that person with the meaning of the message.

"Shall we go to lunch?" said Callaghan rising. "You must be hungry after your voyage."

"For me, no," said the Señora faintly. "I shall never get used to the sea, and I have not yet recovered from that steamer. I desire neither the to-eat nor the to-drink. With your permission, Señor, I shall wait till the evening."

"In that case," said Mr. Callaghan, "perhaps, Drummond, you will escort the Señorita De Castra to the table d'hôte, which is excellent here. Her radiant beauty assures me that her health has not suffered by the voyage, and there is no reason why she should forego her luncheon. I will remain here and entertain the Señora to the best of my poor ability."

Agnes De Castra looked at Drummond and smiled. He offered his arm, the girl took it, and walked out of the room beside him with a sinuous, cat-like grace. Already they seemed on the best of terms. Mr. Callaghan smiled as he watched them.

"A remarkably handsome couple," he said to Mrs. De Castra.

"Yes," said the woman nervously. She seemed to shrink a little from Mr. Callaghan as soon as she found herself alone with him.

"And now," he said, seating himself beside her, "I have a few words to say to you, for which I beg your most particular attention."

Whereupon he proceeded to give the Señora the most amazing news she had ever heard in her life.

. . . . . .

Mr. Callaghan stretched himself luxuriously before the fire in the cosy sitting-room at headquarters.

The portrait of Slim Jim Carey had disappeared from over the chimney-piece.

"In a few minutes," said Mr. Callaghan, "I expect Bell. He will escort that fascinating young creature, Agnes De Castra, Lady Tallbois, who will learn from us exactly what her future is, and what we require from her. I shall form my own judgment of her here, and our next move will be decided on and set going before we part with her."

Vaille whistled gently.

"You take my breath away sometimes, Chief," he said. "You say you're going to let this little tiger-cat into our inner lodge, where none but the faithful have ever been admitted? Is she to see the Callaghan Firm at home, and take tea with it? Surely this is risky; you are putting us into her hands."

"Not so," said Callaghan quietly. "I have weighed all the pros and cons most carefully, and I intend to let her a little way into the ring. Regard her as our latest recruit, Vaille. She has all the qualifications. It is better than dealing with her at arm's length."

Vaille paused, and made an affirmative sign.

"I won't criticize, Chief," he said. "I've questioned your wisdom before, but you've always proved right. And the more startling your policy is, the more right it always seems to be in the end. Have it as you will. What about the mother?"

"I have told the Señora," said Callaghan, with a slight sneer, "all that it is good for her to know. She leaves the matter in my hands; she has no other alternative. And now for the girl. You may per-

haps imagine that when she's in possession of the Tallbois fortune, she will kick over the traces and turn us down. It is not so. Though this time she is the genuine article, I still hold the strings, and shall continue to do so. She knows me well enough to see where her interest lies."

He rose, and wheeled the most comfortable chair in the room carefully over the trap-door. Just then a bell on the mantelpiece buzzed faintly, and Mr. Callaghan left the room. He returned in a couple of minutes, accompanied by Theophilus Bell and Miss Agnes De Castra.

"How charming of you to come to us!" said Callaghan, taking her hand. "You will not regret your visit, Agnes. What do you think of our little club-room?"

The girl glanced round the apartment with dark, judging eyes; her lips twisted into something between a smile and a sneer.

"Club-room?" she answered quietly. "I guess we call 'em 'dives' in my country; only you go down to 'em instead of up. What do I think of it? I'll tell you. Most girls would be scared green at coming to a joint like this, and if I were that sort I'd have backed out before ever I got here. But understand, there's nothing doin' in the teeth-chattering way. The man don't live that can scare me."

"I am sure of it," smiled Callaghan, "and the idea that you could have anything to fear here is comic. We have a business proposition to put to you."

"See here," said Miss De Castra, "I know when I'm up against funny business. There's been hints

enough slung out already since I landed, and I guess you put up the chips for my mother an' me to come over here. I'm wise to it that there's more than a song-and-dance act on the carpet. It's time to show down your hand."

"You have both intelligence and penetration, Agnes," said Mr. Callaghan. "It is a pleasure to deal with you, and we will get down to bed-rock without delay. Pray take this chair, and then we can talk."

Agnes De Castra bestowed her supple figure comfortably in the arm-chair that was placed for her, and crossed one knee over the other.

"You are quite right," said Mr. Callaghan, seating himself opposite her by the wall and beaming upon her with the utmost benevolence; "it was not entirely for the purpose of exploiting your doubtless charming voice on the vaudeville stage that certain friends of mine brought you to England. You seek what is termed in theatrical circles a 'shop.'" He paused. "Suppose now that I can get you one which is worth sixty thousand pounds a year? There remains the question of terms."

The girl regarded him with a gleaming eye.

"Say," she replied curtly, "cut the joshing and get to business."

"I am entirely serious," said Mr. Callaghan quietly. "Empty jesting has no attractions for me. I mean what I say. To prove it, you may draw on me for a thousand pounds, if you choose, when the bank opens tomorrow." He leaned forward. "Do you fully realize, Agnes, that if I put you in possession

of wealth and a big position a share will be due to me, and a large one? And that it would be extremely unwise of you to refuse me my due?"

Agnes De Castra looked at him with mingled sullenness and hope.

"Yes," she answered. "I don't know what the game is, but if there's anything coming to me I know I'd have to pay you. I'll call it a fourth share when the stuff is cut up. I won't haggle for less, but I'll face any racket rather than give more. That's my say-so, and I stand to it. It ought to be enough."

Callaghan watched her intently for some time without speaking. A look of veiled satisfaction came into his eyes, and he sat back.

"I see that we shall agree, Agnes," he said gently. "However, you seem to think I am exaggerating. I have a pleasant surprise for you. You never, I think, knew your father?"

Agnes's face hardened and a viperish gleam shot from under her eyelids.

"I never knew him. I only knew his name, an' that he was English. My father is dead, I reckon. Sometimes I wish it weren't so. You'll notice we don't use his name. I could wish him alive, so that I might get him all that's coming to him. I've an enemy or two. But there's nobody livin' I've ever hated as I do that man who's dead."

"An unusual sentiment, but natural under the circumstances," purred Mr. Callaghan. "It is fortunate then, from every point of view, that he is dead. Your father in fact, were he living at this moment, would be William, tenth Viscount Tallbois of Knayth

in the peerage of England. You are his first-born child; his own legal heiress. The title and estates are now yours."

In brief and pointed words Callaghan told her the story. He told it with remarkable skill. He omitted much, but the major part of what he did tell her was the unvarnished truth.

The girl's face, as she listened, showed first utter incredulity and then amazement. Callaghan's statement carried conviction with it. She twisted in her chair, and at the finish she gripped the arms of it convulsively with her supple fingers. Her eyes shone with a greed and triumph that were scarcely human.

"Say!" she gasped, "I believe you're givin' me straight goods!"

"What I have told you is plain, cold fact," replied Callaghan.

"This," she exclaimed almost deliriously, "is the sort of thing I've sometimes dreamed of! I have mighty queer dreams, don't I? To have hold of the top end of life—right here in England, where these things count! Money—big houses—one of them old titles—why it's the next thing to being a queen! Say, you've got a lead-pipe cinch on it, have you? You hold the cards?"

"I hold them all, and there is no one else who can play them," answered Callaghan quietly. "With my aid you come into your own, and there will be no delay. You will draw that thousand from me in the morning?"

"Yes!" She leaped up, and strode up and down the room once or twice, muttering to herself. She

threw herself into the chair again, with a low gurgling laugh. "Lady Tallbois of Knayth—me!" She looked down at herself and laughed again, but with just a trace of doubt. "I guess I can fill that bill!"

"Doubtless," said Callaghan. "Yet remember—and forgive me for speaking plainly—your lamented father had a police record that must now become fully known. And," he added, looking straight at her, "you yourself—as I happen to know—" He left his sentence unfinished.

The girl winced, and a dark flush spread over her cheeks.

"I guess I can get away with it," she muttered, "when I've all that money and the handle."

"You do not, perhaps, quite understand Society," said Callaghan drily. "There are certain things on which it closes the door."

"I get you," she answered slowly. "I'm the real thing, but I want to run with blood-stock an' not with mavericks from the cattle-yard. There's a bit of a gap, sure. Say, where's that smooth duck with the nice hair—that boy Harold? He's one of your push, isn't he?"

"Harold Drummond?" said Callaghan smiling. "He is not one of us in that sense—he does not mix in such business as this. Drummond is, as I was once reminded, a gentleman. He is of as good stock as—yourself. He has influence, and there is not a smart house in London that does not welcome him. I acknowledge him as my superior—in that direction."

The girl nodded.

"He's the guy to steer me," she said. "I know my

limits. I want to see more of him." She rose to her feet. "My, but this thing is great! It's shaken me like the chills-and-fever—I don't know myself. Let's get on with it! What of this girl Joan, that calls herself Lady Tallbois? How's she going to play the hand?"

"She may fight you," said Callaghan warningly. "Remember that she is in possession; she has power —and money."

"My money! Mine!" said the girl, almost with a snarl. "Gee!—let her fight! That's a game I'm wise to. I'd like it. Let her take me on!"

"On the other hand, it is quite possible, and I believe it is the fact, that she will throw her hand down and surrender everything to you, as soon as she is advised how she stands. There is not much else she can do. In that case," said Mr. Callaghan suavely, "I am rather wondering what your attitude will be! Whether you will be inclined to share with her—to give her, perhaps, a trifle for herself? Eh, Lady Tallbois? She is, I suppose, your sister?"

The girl made a sound like an infuriated she-cat. She glared at Callaghan.

"Sister!" she said fiercely. "You've got your nerve with you to say that to me! Sister—by the left! I'm what I am, but I'm not as low as she is! I'll show her how much sister she is to me!"

"I think you are wise," said Callaghan. "Half measures are always bad policy. You owe her nothing, and she has taken the position that is yours by right."

Agnes Tallbois sprang to her feet.

"I hate the whole breed!" she cried, "and if she stands down now and falls for it, I hate her the worse. It shows the stuff she is! If it wasn't for you I'd still be in the gutter. There's no one on earth will ever make me believe she didn't know! Say, where is she? At this place—Knayth?"

"Either there or at Grosvenor Square," replied Callaghan, "but——"

"Good! I'll have a word with her!" said the girl with extraordinary relish. "I'll show Lady Tallbois where she stands!"

"Bear in mind," said Callaghan, holding up his hand, "that secrecy is necessary until we have got things going."

"Leave me alone for that. I know what I'm doing. When can you get them going then?"

"At once. Everything is ready, and there is no reason for delay. Your triumph will be rapid."

"And you say I can have money now?"

"At nine o'clock tomorrow—five thousand dollars. And now I will bid you good-night, for there is much to do, and I shall be very busy. In my hands your success is assured."

She held out her slim brown hand frankly to Callaghan.

"Good-bye," she said, "you've done well by me. And I'm with you right through—for I can't be against you."

"You put the case in a nutshell," replied Mr. Callaghan with his most courtly bow. "Bell, will you be good enough to escort Lady Tallbois to her mother?"

Mr. Bell, who had been very silent throughout,

led the girl away. As soon as the remaining two were alone, Callaghan lay back in his seat and laughed appreciatively.

"Slim Jim's daughter," he said, "the call of the blood! The thing could not go better. She is our goods. Well, she will make a delightful peeress. I think she may go to Knayth a little too soon. Let her. Her attitude to Joan exactly suits my views. For the rest, she is a lady extremely capable of looking after herself. Let us reserve our congratulations for our young friend Drummond. Hand me those papers, Vaille, for tomorrow the Law will be set in motion. A subtle thought that! I have seldom been an extremist for the Law."

CHAPTER XXII

THE WAY OF THE WORLD

THE mental suffering that can be compressed into forty-eight hours of time, with no hand to help and no heart to confide in, was a revelation to Joan Tallbois. The period since Vaille's visit to her had been one long agony of doubt and despair, lit by an occasional faint gleam of hope.

She had denied herself to everybody, and avoided even Lady Dunluce. There was but one living soul to whom she could tell her story and appeal for the truth, and he was absent, and till now gave no sign. On the second morning a letter came for her from Philip. It only seemed to emphasize her loneliness and disappointment:

HEXTON MANOR,
CO. DURHAM.

MY DEAREST GIRL,—

You know how sorry I am to be parted from you now. I don't know when I shall be able to get away from here; a relative of mine is very ill, and has sent for me. But I shall hope to see you soon. Take care of yourself.

In haste to catch mail,
Your devoted
PHILIP.

That was all. Philip was never much of a letter writer, but for some reason the note struck a chill into Joan's heart. A sick relative—it seemed the baldest of excuses. "Take care of yourself!" Now, when of all times she had the greatest need of him. Did he indeed know of the black shadow that had fallen on her life?

Joan's fingers tightened on the letter, and a little cry of self-reproach broke from her. Who was she, to doubt Philip? What right had she to question his loyalty?

"What does it matter? What does it matter now?" she said despairingly. "Even though his sense of honour drives him to stand by me, and redeem his word—how could I marry him? Never, never! The thing is impossible. I, who am what I am! Not even little Joan Ayre, the working girl—but the nameless child of a thief. Philip—all that is finished." A sob rose in her throat. She covered her face with her hands. In her heart was an agony too deep for tears.

Half an hour later she left the house abruptly and went eastwards to the offices of Langley and Langley, the solicitors who had acted for her in the recent case.

Joan had to force herself to take the step, deeply distasteful to her as it was. Philip was the one person in the world whom she felt able to consult in such a matter. But she could wait no longer; the suspense was too great to bear. Perhaps Mr. Langley could give her some help, and throw a light on it.

A kind of terror seized her as she reached the office; how could she broach the affair to the solicitor, and what was she to say to him? However, she was

spared the trouble, for she found Mr. Langley himself looking particularly anxious and worried.

"Lady Tallbois!" he exclaimed as he received her in the inner office. "You had my message then? I have just written you a letter, and I telephoned, hoping to find you in. I was on the point of starting for your house."

Joan was about to answer that she had had no message, but checked herself. Langley set a chair for her, and seemed to find some difficulty in beginning.

"I have news for you that is not good," he said. "However, no doubt it will turn out all right in the end. But I must be quite frank with you. An amazing thing has happened, and it has made me doubt my senses. Briefly, a claimant has turned up who contests your rights to the Tallbois peerage and estates. As your legal representative in the late case, I have received notice of an action which is to be taken against you at Law, claiming all those rights which you hold. I will explain it, and forgive me if I have to speak plainly."

Haltingly, and with considerable embarrassment, Mr. Langley told her in effect the story she had already heard from Vaille. Indeed there was a good deal more in it than that, but the details did not much interest Joan.

She heard Langley's statement with remarkable calmness. The lawyer, outwardly at least, was the more agitated of the two. Joan had never felt any real doubt that Vaille's story was genuine, and this confirmation of it found her only too well prepared. She was not going to betray herself before Langley.

"Now tell me," she said quietly, when he had finished, "what your opinion is. Can this claim succeed? Is it not likely to be fraudulent?"

"How can I say," he protested, "till I have the full evidence before me? It will be for the courts to decide. You will have to defend the action."

"You must know enough already," persisted Joan, "to say whether it may succeed or not. I want your own view."

"Frankly," he answered, after hesitating, "I regard it as most serious. I do not mean that you will not win—no, no. But—well, the claimant must have a strong case. If this—this marriage of William Tallbois is proved—why there it is. I find it impossible to believe the claim is based on a fraud; it would be so useless, and would collapse immediately. A Tichborne affair could not happen in these days. Of course the woman will have to prove her position to the hilt."

Joan looked at him searchingly.

"Who is acting for Agnes De Castra?" she asked. She wondered if the ubiquitous Vaille or Bell were handling it.

"A small but respectable firm of solicitors," said Langley. "I believe an eminent counsel has been briefed. Now, Lady Tallbois, what help can you give me? Can you throw any light on the case?"

Joan shook her head.

"It seems to be a question," she said, "simply of whether Agnes De Castra can show proofs of her identity and of—the marriage. If she can, she is Lady Tallbois. She has to satisfy the Law, I suppose,

that it is true. If I have the case fought to the knife——"

Mr. Langley stared at her.

"If?" he said. "Of course you will fight?"

"Yes," said Joan slowly, "even if it is true, I might be able, perhaps, to defeat it? I could make it a long fight, I suppose? There are many obstacles I could throw in the way. I am in possession, and I have the money."

Mr. Langley was about to reply, but checked himself and was silent. He looked uncomfortable. Joan, with a quick instinct, saw what was in his mind. She had the money. But if she were defeated she would have no money. Not a penny of the Tallbois fortune would be hers to pay with. She would be a pauper and a bankrupt, already heavily in debt to the Knayth estate, and accountable to it by the Law for all she had taken out.

It looked to Joan decidedly as though Langley had formed a stronger opinion in his own mind about the case than he had told her. He was a lawyer, and a very shrewd one. He had his firm and his reputation to consider. There was a chance that he might lose heavily, both on past and on future accounts, over this affair. And he did not know whether he was talking to Viscountess Tallbois of Knayth or a discredited nobody. It was very awkward for Mr. Langley. He was thinking not of Joan but of himself. It is the way of the world. Nor did it escape for a moment the girl who was watching him.

"Listen, Mr. Langley," she said, with a calmness that surprised him, "I will not use the Tallbois for-

tune in fighting this case. There is strength enough in the Law, I suppose, to protect me if the claim is false. But if Agnes De Castra can show that she is Lady Tallbois, let her take all that is hers." She rose to her feet. "And now tell me, has Mr. Philip Mottisfont expressed any opinion about it?"

"He can know nothing of it!" said Langley. "He is in the North, unable, I believe, to get away. But he must come now at any cost! I have written and wired him today. Nothing can be done till I have consulted him. If you will——"

"You know," said Joan quietly, "that I am engaged to be married to Mr. Mottisfont?"

Mr. Langley's pale face coloured, he did not seem to know which way to look. Before he could make a conventional answer, Joan held out her hand to him.

"Good-bye," she said gently, "and thank you a hundred times for all you have done for me. You will not have to do much more. I will tell you now that I am convinced I have no title to Knayth and that this girl, who is the rightful claimant, will take all that I, for a little time, have held. Will you please open the door? I wish to go."

"But, Lady Tallbois," exclaimed Langley, deeply affected, "your view is quite wrong! There are many things to consider. I hope—I believe firmly—that all will yet be well. Wait until Mr. Mottisfont——"

Joan freed her hand and escaped somehow, a little blindly, from the room. At any rate she found herself in the street without quite knowing how she got there. Half an hour later, after a brief visit to a tele-

graph office, she arrived at Waterloo and took a ticket to Clievemead.

It seemed a lesser mercy, after the buffets of fate, that she was able to get a compartment to herself on the train. She felt as though every wayfarer in the streets, every passer-by on the station platform, were staring at her as though to say: "That is the nameless woman who holds wealth and station to which she has no right. The very clothes she wears are not her own. Soon honest folk will know her for what she is."

The instinct of the wounded animal that shuns its kind took possession of Joan. As the train moved out she lay back with a little sigh, and pressed a hand to her burning temples.

"There is but one thing to be done," she said to herself; "only one thing now! To hide myself—to get away from it all. I cannot face what is coming. Kinder to Philip—yes, and best for me. I know what I shall do."

It was necessary to go to Knayth, in any case. And a faint hope was at the bottom of her mind that there might be a letter there from Philip, which she had missed in town. The train was a fast one. When she stepped down at Clievemead station, porters and station master saluted her respectfully—an added mockery.

The car for which she had telegraphed was at the station. The two miles were swiftly covered, and the Rolls-Royce hummed gently up the steep rise to the Abbey.

Never had Knayth looked more peaceful and lovely

than now, in the deep gold of the setting sun. Sorrow and strife and tears seemed utterly foreign to it. As Joan descended from the car, John Goodenough came down the steps to take her wraps.

He was struck by the pallor of his young mistress, and the dark shadows beneath her eyes. A keen anxiety peeped through the impassive mask of his features.

"Are there any letters for me?" she asked listlessly.

"There are three in the morning-room, m'lady, that came this morning."

Joan hurried to the room. A glance at the envelopes was enough; there was no letter from Philip. Why should there be? She tore the letters open, glanced at them, and tossed them aside.

"It is just as well," murmured Joan.

After a few minutes' thought she sat down at the desk and began to write a letter—not to Philip, but to Lady Dunluce. It appeared her duty. The old lady had been more than kind to her. A mist swam before Joan's eyes as she wrote, and a tear dropped on the paper. She closed the envelope with an unsteady hand and went out to drop it in the mail box in the hall.

A harsh, incisive voice struck on Joan's ear; an accent that recalled memories of earlier days. She looked round. John Goodenough was answering a caller who stood in the porch.

"I will enquire if Lady Tallbois is at home," said the footman with dignity and a touch of hauteur. "What name shall I say?"

Joan looked at the dark, graceful girl in the porch,

who was staring at the footman with defiant eyes. Her garish, tawdry dress contrasted oddly with the mellow colours of the Abbey hall. With an instant flash of intuition Joan guessed who this stranger was, and before the girl could answer she stepped forward.

"I am Lady Tallbois," said Joan. "You wish to see me?"

"I guess that's what I'm here for!" said the visitor.

"Come this way," answered Joan, and she walked towards the morning-room. Goodenough's eyes followed the two girls with a puzzled stare as they disappeared into the room.

Joan walked to the far end of the apartment, away from door and windows, and, turning, motioned her visitor courteously to a chair. The girl took no notice. For a few moments they faced each other in silence; the stranger scanned Joan's dress and face, looking her over from head to shoes, and her lips curled in a sneer.

"Who did you say you were?" she asked.

"I am Joan Tallbois," was the quiet reply.

The girl put a hand on the table and leaned forward, staring at Joan. There was an odd, almost serpentine suggestion in her attitude. Her eyes flashed threateningly.

"You claim that name, do you?" she said, and her voice broke suddenly into a fluent, jeering laugh. "I am Viscountess Tallbois! Do you get me?"

. . . . . .

Joan tried to answer, but the words died in her throat. She looked at Agnes De Castra with a dumb

appeal, that seemed to seek in the girl's eyes for the least hint of sympathy or friendliness. All that Joan could see in the attitude of Agnes was a hard vindictiveness that amazed her—a sense of vulgar triumph.

"You are Agnes De Castra?" said Joan haltingly, "if the story I have heard is true—and I do not doubt it—then certainly you are Lady Tallbois. It was only made clear to me today."

"Forget it!" replied Agnes, swift as a whip-lash. "Do you think you can play me for a sucker? You've been wise to it from the first!"

Joan shrank back as if she had been struck in the face. Aghast, she stared at Agnes, her eyes travelling from the venomously beautiful features of the girl, flushed and dark, to the twitching hand that rested on the table, and its tinted finger-nails.

Joan meant nothing by the look; she hardly knew what she was doing. But it stirred Agnes to an uncontrollable fury.

"Listen, you!" she cried, coming close and thrusting her face into Joan's. "Maybe we both have thieves' blood in us, but you've got the habit, and I've not! I only take what's my own! This swell house you're strutting in is mine—the clothes you're wearin' are mine. Got that?"

Joan was deadly pale.

"You don't even put up a bluff, eh!" said Agnes with biting contempt. "No, because you know the game's lost. You haven't got the sand for a rough-house! It's well for me I've got the proofs, or you'd have handed me the ice-bowl mighty quick. Yes, you could sit tight and rake in the chips while you

thought I was out of it. But when your hand's called you throw down! Lucky for me that I have good friends. This is where you quit!"

It seemed to Joan at that moment as though the blood in her veins had turned to ice. It had been in her mind to warn Agnes what she might have to expect from her "friends," as she termed Vaille and Bell. For Joan believed that she recognized clearly the handiwork of these men behind it all. One touch of pity, of gentleness in her rival, and she would have uttered the warning.

But Joan was no more than human. A bitterness hardly less intense than that of Agnes welled up in her heart when she reflected that this vitriol-tongued girl was robbing her of all she had—happiness, love, the hope of life. And she left the word unspoken.

"You have the proofs, you say," she replied very quietly. "You have but to make them good in a court of law. When that is done—and not before—you will be mistress here."

Agnes appeared staggered by Joan's self-command at such a moment. A sense of inferiority goaded her afresh.

"Yes!" she hissed. "You're boss here now, ain't you? You'd call in that big flunkey from the hall, if you dared, an' have me thrown out. But I'm the goods, and in a week all the world will know it. Your day's done—get back in the gutter where you belong!"

She turned with a whisk of her skirts, and laughing triumphantly, strode out through the open window onto the lawn. She made her way across to the park

road, turning back twice to look at the great house, and again Joan heard her laugh. Then she passed out of sight.

For a while Joan stood motionless by the window. Her teeth were set tight; a sudden gust of passion shook her. But she was thankful not to have betrayed herself before Agnes. The whole incident seemed like a nightmare.

Her hands fell to her sides with a gesture of abandonment.

"What does it matter now?" she said under her breath. "It will be all like that. I will not stay and see it through."

Joan went up to her room, the great south room with the rose silk curtains, and locked herself in.

Half an hour later she came down the stairs wearing the little plain linen frock in which she had first come to Clievemead. It was the only dress she owned that had not been bought with Tallbois money. In the hall she encountered John Goodenough. Her appearance startled him.

"Has your visitor left, m'lady?" he asked. Obviously he had missed Agnes's departure.

"Yes," replied Joan mechanically, "and I am going, too."

"Shall I order the car?" he enquired, his eyes searching her face.

"No, I shall not want the car," said Joan. She glanced up at him. "You have been happy here, have you not, Goodenough? I am glad of that. You will not wish to leave Knayth."

He came closer.

"Is anything wrong, m'lady?" he said in a lower voice.

"I think," answered Joan dully, "that nothing has ever been right." She did not look at him, and was hardly conscious of what she was saying.

For once Goodenough seemed puzzled and at a loss. There was an anxious look in his eyes.

"If your ladyship would confide in me," he said almost under his breath, "I might be able to help you."

Joan started slightly, and looked into his face. It was a strange offer for a footman to make, yet she did not feel it so, much less resent it. This tall, grave man, with his compelling eyes, always had an odd effect on her—as though to him it was given to command, rather than to her.

And intuitively she felt that there was something behind his request; that a still more poignant experience awaited her than that which she had just passed through. What it might be she could not guess; she only felt herself shrinking from it. Joan had borne all she could.

"Is there nothing I can do for your ladyship?" he persisted.

"Yes," answered Joan, "in my boudoir on the sofa are a few things I have put together. You might put those in a bag you will find there and bring them down."

Goodenough hesitated, then bowed and left to execute the order. He apparently did not realize that it was only given to get rid of him. By that simple expedient Joan found herself alone, and returning

to the great dining-hall she gave one last glance round her, raised her eyes to the jewelled Goblet in its recess in the wall and passed quietly out onto the lawn. She passed through the water-garden, and hurried along the farther slope.

Farewell to Knayth! Her one obsession was to get away, quietly and unseen. Let those who remained read the riddle if they chose. Joan's heart beat rapidly as she flitted through the plantation.

Suddenly Joan stopped. She had forgotten something. Turning back she passed round by the cedars and reached the aviary under the west colonnade.

Jack Quicksilver, the homing pigeon, sat on the perch preening himself before settling down for the night. He turned his expressive eye on Joan and crooned pleasantly as if in welcome.

"Jack!" she said chokily. "I can't leave you here—for those who are to take my place! You are the only thing that belongs to me."

She opened the aviary door; Jack flew down as she did so. He allowed her to pick him up without protest. Joan held him against her bosom, his soft head touching her chin. Her eyes were misty.

"You were an honest man's gift, Jack," she said.

For a moment she reflected. Was it best to free him, and let him wing his way home?

"Choose, Jack!" she said, and opening her hand, allowed him to stand on it. The pigeon rose at once, with a joyous clap of his wings, and made a wide circuit in the air. He returned, and settled quietly on her shoulder.

"What, will you share my lot, Jack?" she said

with a tremulous laugh. "It may be a hard life. Come, then."

The wicker cage in which Jack had come to Knayth hung on a hook near by. She took it down and placed the pigeon inside. Jack shook his feathers, settling down quite contentedly. Joan left the colonnade, and seeing one of the gardners approaching, hid herself behind a cedar. When the coast was clear she hurried through the shrubberies and made a detour to the park entrance.

Thence Joan passed out between the great pillars with their wyvern crests, and out onto the highroad—a forlorn little figure in cheap linen, trudging down the hill, the bird cage swinging at her side.

. . . . . .

It was late when Joan stumbled wearily up the dark staircase in Firr Road, Lambeth, and gave a timid little knock on the door, under which shone a gleam of light. She was not even sure if she would find what she sought. But a well-known voice answered, and Joan turned the handle.

Emmie Clegg stood by the dressing-table, her fiery red hair loose and flowing over her shoulders. She gave a cry of amazement on recognizing her visitor.

"Joan! Is this you?" Emmie stepped forward and stared blankly. "Why, what have you been doin' to yourself!"

Joan set down the cage. She was trembling slightly, and she looked pitifully at Emmie.

"I've come back," she said in a scarcely audible voice. "I—I thought you would give me shelter

tonight, Emmie. I haven't anywhere else to go. And—and——"

"But for mercy's sake, what's wrong?" cried Emmie shrilly.

In a few faltering sentences, Joan told her story. So disconnected was it that at first Emmie thought she was out of her mind, but soon the keen-witted little listener caught the gist of it, and understood. Joan tried to continue, but suddenly she checked herself, swayed blindly, and broke into a wild storm of tears.

In a moment two stout arms were round her. Emmie sank into a chair and held the sobbing girl to her bosom.

"They've done you down, have they?" said Emmie thickly. "They've taken all you had. It's like 'em! You're safe with me, Joan. There's always shelter for you here. Joan—my little Joan—you've come back to me! Don't cry like that—dear little Joan, don't cry!"

She soothed Joan as a mother soothes a child. A lump rose in her throat as she felt the girl's quivering agony grow less, and the slim body became limp in her arms.

"Try not to think of it, Joan," said Emmie softly. "Cross it all out—it's finished! I'll look after you, dear. You're with friends now. Lord help 'em if they ever meddle with you when I'm around!"

A thought came into her mind, and her face darkened.

"Wasn't there one to stand by you, Joan?" she whispered. "Not even one?"

Joan lifted her head and looked up. She tried to speak, but no words would come, and she hid her face again on Emmie's breast. And Emmie understood; with inborn tact she forebore to put the question that was upon her lips. Indeed, she did not think it worth asking.

"Swells!" whispered Emmie, staring before her with extraordinary virulence. "To hell with them all!"

Joan remained motionless; she seemed to have sunk into a trance of complete exhaustion. With deft fingers Emmie undressed her, and put her to bed as if she had been a baby. For a long while Emmie sat watching over the tired face on the pillow, till the candle flickered low.

"So Mister Philip Mottisfont stands down?" murmured Emmie. "And well for her!"

She crossed to the table, and twisted her red hair into a coarse plait.

"I think," she said between her teeth, "I can get a little bit back for Joan, here!"

CHAPTER XXIII

MOTTISFONT PLEADS GUILTY

THREE days later Joan sat by the window of the dingy room that was her refuge from the world. The world that had become a desert, since the man she loved was blotted out of her life. Joan felt that her heart was dead.

Her only company was the homing pigeon, whose cage hung in a ray of sunlight. For an hour Joan had remained there; her face of a transparent pallor, her eyes large and luminous. She had touched the uttermost depths of suffering.

There came a step outside, and a soft tap at the door.

"Come in," said Joan faintly. She expected Emmie. But Emmie would not rap, and it was not her step. Joan turned, and a stifled cry broke from her. The colour flamed to her face.

"Philip!" she said breathlessly. "You!"

Mottisfont stood before her. He had closed the door, and stood with his back to it. His tall figure dominated the room. It seemed to Joan that the sun ray grew brighter, lighting up his face and shining full upon him. He looked at Joan in silence.

"How did you find me?" she said trembling; and then with a little cry: "Philip, is there hope for me, then? Is all that dreadful story false?"

"Your claim upon Knayth?" he said very quietly. "Is that what you are thinking of, Joan? You had best hear the truth, once and for all, for it is kindest that you should know. You have no chance. Neither the money nor the title can be yours. But what of it, Joan? You had not them when first I knew you."

Two swift steps and he had her in his arms. His lips were pressed to her forehead, and he held her close.

"Joan, my little Joan!" he whispered brokenly, "has it been very hard? Dear, I would have given my soul if you could have been spared all this agony!" His arms tightened, and his voice grew deep and strong. "Courage, Joan! You are stainless—blameless—your own dear self. Never think of what you have lost! What is it, after all?"

She tried to free herself.

"I have only one loss," she said piteously. "You! Why did you come here, Philip? Ah, you are generous! But it is your sense of honour that brings you."

"Honour!" he said, and to her amazement she heard him laugh aloud.

"Do you know what I am?" she whispered.

"The girl I love!"

There was a moment of absolute silence. Then Joan gave a great sob, and tearing herself free, stared at him, wild-eyed.

"Philip, do you mean that?" she panted. "It is all ended! Did you dream, after what has happened to me, that I would consent to hold you to your word?"

"I don't know what you consent to," he answered. "I only know that I shall hold you to yours!" He took her in his arms again so fiercely that she could not resist. "There is only one thing on earth could make me give you up—that you had ceased to love me. Look up at me, Joan!"

He raised her face gently, and looked into her eyes.

"You love me, Joan. Your eyes—your dear eyes—cannot lie. And I love you—you are mine to all eternity." There was a quiet force in his voice, a power that overbore all denial. "Dear, before three days are past, we shall be married."

He felt her trembling. She saw such a splendour and tenderness in Philip's eyes as she had never dreamed of. He was a man transformed.

"You have doubted me!" he whispered, and a shadow of pain darkened his face. He seated himself and drew her down gently beside him.

"Joan," he said humbly, "I deserved it. I think that was the kind of brute I was—before I knew you for what you are. Dearest in the world, did I ever chatter to you of fame, and money, and power as the one goal? You have taught me better; you have shown me the honour a woman's love is to a man—you, the dearest of all women. Joan, you are God's gift to me!"

With a sudden movement of abandon, Joan slipped to the floor at his feet and buried her head on his knees, her hands hiding her face. She broke into a passion of weeping.

"Oh, I am shamed!" she whispered. "I thought—I thought you cared because—I was rich. Philip,

my darling—my lover. Oh, I am shamed to my soul!"

He caught her up swiftly, and held her tight.

"Joan! Don't do that!" he gasped. "It hurts like a knife. You are too far above me, dear. If there are reproaches, let them fall on me. My shoulders are the broader. There is only one thing I cannot bear—that you should think I held aloof when you were in trouble. I was at the death-bed of my only kinsman, Joan; and I left him unburied when Langley's wire brought me the news. Enough of that. I know why you left Knayth. But I have found you, and I will never let you go."

"Philip," she whispered. "Philip . . . "

"Three days from now!" he said. "Saturday—and the time ten. How slow these wretched laws are—if I had my way it should be in an hour's time! On Saturday we shall be married. Why!" he said joyously, "it's three days ahead of the time we fixed before—we gain three days!"

She shook her head.

"You are mad, Philip," she whispered. "It can't be. I'm not going to spoil your life."

"I haven't the slightest intention of letting you try." He took her hands in his, and stood back.

"Listen," he said firmly. "I'm taking this matter in hand, Joan, and you, too. You've nothing to do, nothing to say, nothing to think about. On Saturday you will be my wife. Then it will be your turn to command."

She looked at him silently, her breast heaving, and then bowed her head.

"That is settled," he said quietly. "In the meantime, Joan, you cannot be left alone. Come with me to Lady Dunluce; she will take care of you. She's distracted at losing you. You can——"

"No!" cried Joan swiftly. "Not that, Philip. I cannot! I will never see any of those people again. That is all finished. I will not go."

"It is a pity you feel like that," he said quietly. Philip glanced round the room. "Well, these are poor quarters, but honest and sound. It's Emma Clegg's place, isn't it? You'll be safe with her! Yes, she'll look after you—you couldn't have a better guardian than that little firebrand of a girl. A rare watch-dog!" He laughed softly.

"Yes. I'd rather stay, Philip," she said under her breath.

"Darling, are you happier now?" he whispered, drawing her to him. "My love!"

"My darling!" she murmured. "Philip!" Joan gave a little sob of mingled happiness and pain. Her heart beat wildly; she strove to speak, but the thing she wished to say would not pass her lips. She could not force her tongue to utter it. It remained unspoken.

Very tenderly he comforted her. The charm of his voice, the joy and pride in his eyes, the gentleness of his caress, soothed the storm in her heart. She lay quite quietly in his arms.

"I must go," he whispered at last, "and prepare. Things must be done at once or there will be delay, and I will not risk delay. Not an hour! Good-bye, dearest; it will not be for long."

He was moving to the door, when Joan sprang up and held out her arms.

"Once more!" she said wildly. "Kiss me once more, Philip, before you go!"

He returned and pressed his lips to hers. But there was so strange an air about Joan at that moment that, as he released her, Philip gazed at her keenly.

"Remember, Joan, you are mine, and no power can take you from me. Were you at the uttermost ends of the earth I would find and claim you. And that I swear by my soul."

He kissed her gently on the forehead, and left the room without another word. He went rapidly down the dingy staircase, and had just passed through the stone-paved hall into the street, when he nearly collided with a girl who was on the point of entering.

It was Emmie Clegg.

She gave a little gasp, stopped dead, and licked her lips. Mottisfont stopped, too. The girl's eyes blazed at him.

"Gaw!" she said thickly. "You! You—*here!*"

She raised her freckled fist as if to strike him across the mouth.

"You been messin' about with Joan!"

Philip looked at the lady with interest.

"Joan and I," he said in matter-of-fact tones, "have just been settling about our marriage. We have had to put the date forward a little."

"Your *what!*" gasped Emmie. She felt as though the pavement were spinning round.

"Come in here," he said, taking hold of her by the arm. "I have a word to say to you."

He led her, unresisting, into the hall. Emmie had received a shock that, for a moment, stopped even her fluent powers of speech.

"Look here," he said, "you have heart and courage; you're a sound friend to Joan, or she would never have run to you like this when trouble came to her. This is a time when Joan needs a woman by her. I want you to look after her and guard her as a sheep-dog guards a fold. It's only for three days."

Emmie looked at him with smouldering eyes.

"I see," she said slowly. "Then it's all a snide story she's got hold of! She's the goods after all—the money an' the title are all right. I see. Now listen here——"

"She has less than nothing," said Philip. "The story is true. Joan has lost a lot of things that do not matter. But she cannot go back to—her own people. Mark what I say—it is your task to see that she does not fret about that. Ensure, above everything, that she does nothing foolish, for she is scarcely answerable for herself just now. On Saturday, at ten in the morning, we shall be married."

Emmie made an inarticulate noise in her throat.

"Married! To you!" she said with inexpressible unbelief and contempt. "When she's not only a beggar. She's a——"

There was a flash of anger in Philip's eyes that checked her.

"You'll marry her?" she gasped. "You? An' be turned down by all your—toffs! It ain't in you! Lose your job of work, everything you was after—

an' your money? She owes thousands to that rotten peerage—I've heard it from her. You——"

"Leave all that out!" he said roughly. "It does not concern us. Joan honours me by giving me her hand." His voice softened. "I am going to try and make her happy. I want your help."

Emmie caught her breath. She came nearer, her eyes searching his face with a fierce eagerness. What she saw caused her to step back, almost in awe. A little sigh escaped her.

"She's safe," she thought. "Joan wins!"

"You love Joan?" said Philip quietly.

Emmie's eye-lashes became wet.

"Love her? She's the only gal I ever cared a straw for! Love her?"

"I knew it. There is no one worth a straw who would not love her. Are you married yet?"

"No," said Emmie mechanically. "Next week."

"Good. You shall be her bridesmaid."

The girl gave a faint gasp.

"Remember," he said gently, putting a hand on her shoulder, "be very kind to her. But don't go to her now. She is upset, and overwrought; give her an hour to herself."

He stepped back.

"Till Saturday. But I shall see you before then."

He raised his hat courteously to Emmie, and left the house.

Emmie ran to the open door. In utter bedazement she watched Philip's tall figure striding away down the street.

. . . . . .

Joan returned to her seat at the window and tried to still the beating of her heart. She felt as though one vivid, glorious ray of light and love had flashed across her world, fading to leave behind a darkness blacker than before—a very pit of despair.

Right or wrong, she had convinced herself where the path of duty lay. Finally and utterly impossible was her marriage with Philip. She was amazed that he had not understood her; that he took it for granted that she would marry him.

"Never, never!" she said aloud. "It shall not be—on that one thing I am determined. Nothing shall shake me. But oh! I could not tell him so—the strength was not in me to do it. His touch—his eyes looking into mine. What could I say? He would not have listened."

A passion of self-abasement seized her.

"How could I wreck his life? Drag him down to the depths where I have fallen!"

She seemed to hear the mocking laughter of the world, the sneers of the great army of Philistines, the veiled jibes of women, and the contemptuous pity. Justice or injustice did not enter the question; the fact remained that Philip's life would inevitably be darkened, every gate that had been opened to him, bolted and barred. With a prophetic vision she saw into the future.

"Allied to *me!*" she muttered. "A drag upon his heels to the day of his death."

"Loyal and true!" she whispered. "And how have I repaid him? He, who might choose any woman.

I have shown myself unfit to be his wife. He had a greater trust, a greater faith than mine. Shall I reward him now by lowering him to the dust? To share the life of such as I am?"

She passed a hand across her eyes.

"He thinks he needs me. But in time he will forget. Better for him, a thousand times. As for me—what do I matter? I will go—right away, and save him from this madness."

Joan rose unsteadily to her feet. But a cloud of doubt came into her eyes.

"If I do—he will find me! He said it. And he keeps his word. How can I hide myself from him?" She seemed to see Philip's face before her, strong, determined, conquering. "And heaven help me, I cannot deny him—when his arms are round me, and his lips on mine. For I am weak."

She looked towards the window. Something she saw there brought a swift thought flashing through her brain.

"There is a way!" she cried. "I can make it impossible! Yes, I can close the door on temptation, both for him and for me. I have the power to finish it once for all—and nobody can ever blame him."

She snatched a letter that lay on the table, tore off the blank half-sheet, and seized a pencil. There was a moment's pause.

"What if even this fails me?" she whispered. "That would be the last irony!"

Joan gave a dreadful little laugh. There was a light almost of madness in her eyes, and a fierce resolve. Controlling herself with a strong effort, she

scribbled a few words on the paper and folded it. She opened the cage swinging in the window, and took out Jack Quicksilver, the homing pigeon that was Alf's last gift.

She fastened the note under the two little rubber bands on his leg. The pigeon made no resistance. She opened her hand to let him go. Then for an instant her heart failed her, and she tried to retain him.

Jack eluded her deftly, and with a flap of his wings settled on the sill of the open window. With a low croon of satisfaction he launched himself into the air, and rose above the roofs opposite. Higher and higher he soared, in great ringing circles, till the smoky city lay far below.

Then, sure of his bearing, he flew north-eastwards to Hackney, swift and straight as an arrow.

CHAPTER XXIV

THE SAFEGUARD

MR. ALFRED BLODMORE, in a large overcoat, with his left ear slightly swollen and a muffler round his neck, walked along Billiter Street towards the Naturalistic Emporium. He attracted the reverent attention of a mob of small boys.

"There he goes, fellers!" exclaimed a lad who wore a piece of sugar sacking picturesquely spliced into the back of his pants. "Young Alf Blodmore—Lightning Alf. Just back from Crump's Stadium—he outed Larry the Twister in five rounds fer the Lightweight Belt."

The boy addressed expectorated joyfully.

"Tell me suffin' I don't know. I took four to one about him, an' I'm goin' to touch it. Couldn't get to the fight meself—all seats full. Ah, he's a credit to Hackney!"

The small boys raised a cheer as their hero went by, and Mr. Blodmore, the pride of Billiter Street, retreated hastily into the little bird-shop. The lad who was minding the shop received the news of Alf's victory with mad hilarity. Alf tipped him five shillings, pulled his ear affectionately, and went upstairs to change into old clothes. Presently he entered the loft at the top of the house and, seating

himself by the open window, became thoughtful. There were still times when Alf felt the need to be alone.

The flush of perfect health was on his skin, despite the battering he had recently received in the Ring, and there was courage and a certain grimness in his eyes.

"Old Uncle's right," he said meditatively; "fightin's a good game. It knocks the rot out of a man. Hardens him up—teaches him not to grizzle over what can't be helped. And yet—I can't seem to forget—sometimes——"

He shifted in his seat.

"Joan! Little Joan!

"Right above me. Outside o' my world altogether." He heaved a big sigh. "Ought to be easy to drop it for good. But it ain't. If only it wasn't for that lawyer swine!" Alf's eyes reddened, and his big chin stuck out. "Him! Gosh, I'd give twenty years to have him in the Ring in front o' me—without the gloves!"

Alf swore softly.

"I wonder?" he murmured, staring through the window absently.

There was a rustle and clap of wings. A big grey pigeon lighted on the sill. Alf stared at it blankly, and then started up with a cry.

"Jack Quicksilver!" he exclaimed. His face changed colour. The homer, with an encouraging chuckle of welcome, fluttered onto his master's shoulder. The slip of folded paper attached to the bird's leg caught Alf's eye; he tore it away almost roughly, and opened it with eager fingers. Jack

dropped to the floor and began unconcernedly to pick up grains of corn.

Come to me.—JOAN, 7 Firr Road, Lambeth.

"There's somethin' wrong!" gasped Alf. "What's she doin' there—now? She needs me!"

He sprang up with a shout, and went down the stairs like a whirlwind.

"Mind the shop!" he bawled to the boy, as he rushed down the passage; "I'm off!"

He scudded along Billiter Street, his overcoat flapping in the wind and his cap over one eye.

"Maybe that bloke I dotted is after her again," he muttered; "a job for me!"

An hour of rapid transit brought him to Lambeth, and he arrived, breathless and panting, in the little third-story sitting-room. Joan Tallbois was there.

She was standing erect, deadly pale, her lips curved in a faint, fixed smile, that reminded Alf of a waxwork figure. He stopped short and stared at her, smitten with a sudden sense of tragedy for which he could not account. His gaze travelled over the cheap linen dress and the worn shoes. The look of strained suffering in her eyes made him shiver.

"What's gone amiss?" he said hoarsely. "Jack brought your note. You want anything done, Miss Joan? You've need of me?"

"The question," said Joan quietly, "is whether you have need of me."

He gaped at her wholly at a loss. Joan looked at him strangely. Twice her lips moved as if in an effort to speak, but she said nothing.

"There's something you want me to do," he said eagerly. "Anything on earth—just say it an' it's done, Joan—m'lady!"

"Don't call me that!" she said quickly. "Have you not heard? Hasn't Emmie told you?"

"She's told me nothin'. I ain't seen her."

"Ah! I see," said Joan very slowly, the colour flamed once to her cheeks and faded again. "I thought—perhaps she told you. No doubt she thinks—now—" Her voice nearly failed her. "She's quite right—" Joan swayed a little, and caught at the chair beside her.

"You ain't well!" exclaimed Alf, starting forward in alarm. "Sit down. Shall I fetch somebody?"

"No, no! Don't bring anybody." Joan sank into the chair. "Sit right over there, will you, Alf—by the window." He seated himself, looking rather frightened, where the light was full on his face. "There has been a—a blunder," said Joan. "I am not Lady Tallbois. I—I'm turned out. I have no money—no name—no anything. That is all."

She told him the pith of the story in a strangely even, emotionless voice. It seemed to Alf as though he were listening to someone talking in their sleep. Yet she made it pitilessly clear. There was conviction in every word she said.

The thing came home to Alf like a thunder-clap. For a few moments his mind seemed to grope blindly after the truth. Into his eyes came a light of joy and amazement that he could not suppress—a light of hope. He sprang up.

"Then—you ain't a viscountess!" he gasped. "You—you're just—Joan!"

She nodded.

"Joan," he repeated dazedly; and then, with a look of interrogation, "Joan—Ayre?"

"No," she said. "Not that. Joan Nothing. Joan Nobody. Joan-without-a-name," she said very quietly. "The unclaimed child of a thief. Now do you understand?"

Alf understood. He stared at her blankly and tried to speak.

"What of it!" he said, with a sudden wild outburst. "Joan, what's all this talk of what you are? You're Joan! What have them cursed toffs done to you?"

"Nothing. I have come back to my friends. Emmie has given me shelter."

"But," he said in a strangled voice, "that chap you was goin' to——"

Alf checked himself in time. He had not realized what he was saying.

"All that is finished!" she said swiftly, almost fiercely.

Alf gasped.

"If they've treated you bad," he said, shaking with rage, "all that kid-glove crowd—let me pay 'em! There must be rights of yours that you can have yet. Tell me more about it—give me the job, Joan; it'll suit me."

"No!" she said quickly, "you are wrong. And all that is ended—finished. Don't speak of it again. That's not what I called you here for, Alf."

"What, then?" he said bewildered.

Joan was white as a sheet. She did not look at him, but stared dully at the wall, and for some time was silent.

"Can you not guess?" she muttered, "or—must I tell you?"

There was a stifled noise in Alf's throat. He leaned forward, trembling.

"Joan! D'you mean—there's a chance for me?" he said hoarsely.

She turned and looked straight at him.

"Do you want me—still?" she said quietly.

"Want you?" he gasped, rising and moving slowly towards her. "To me, you're just the highest of all the women as walks this earth—an' always will be. Lord above us, do you think I care what you've got or ain't got? You're you! I love you. Want you!"

She held up her hand.

"Stop!" she said. "I have a warning to give you. It will be best for you to go now, and leave the word unsaid. Best, a hundred times, for you to—to turn me down. You are worth a much better fate than I can give. But it must be for you to choose. I am going to be quite honest with you, Alf. I do not love you. There is no hope that I shall ever have love to give. But if you want me—if you believe that in marrying me you will win happiness"—she choked back a sob—"take me. I'll do what I can—I'll do what I can—to make you happy. That much I promise."

With a great cry he fell on his knees, and taking her hands, pressed them to his lips.

"Joan! It's all I ever hoped for!" he said thickly. "Why should you love me—a chap like me? But you'll take me, an' I'm happier now than if the world was mine. Joan, you've promised! You've promised!"

She gave a faint shiver.

"Am I right or wrong?" she whispered, staring past him. "Let me do this one good thing—if it is good. Let me bring happiness to someone—I, who yet have brought only sorrow to others." She felt a tear drop on the hands that Alf was holding. "That two good men should suffer—and care for such as I am!" she said, under her breath. "The pity of it!"

"Joan!" he cried. "I only ask to live an' serve you! It shall be yours to command—always. Say it again, Joan—you'll marry me!"

"There is one condition," she said, "my last."

"Name it! Anything in the world that you ask o' me."

"That it shall be done quickly," she said, with a gasp and a rush of colour to her face. "Alf, this—this marriage must be soon. I am yours—you have said it. I cannot be left alone—to wait, and think. I wish it to be at once!"

He rose, looking almost scared; by the look in her eyes he thought she was hysterical. But he rose to the occasion.

"At once? I wish it were now!" Alf exclaimed. He believed he guessed her reason. He thought rapidly. "Thursday now—in two days it can be done, licence an' all. I know the ropes—many's the time I've lain awake thinkin' of it." He flushed red

in his turn. "Joan," he said haltingly, "you won't mind a—a registry office?"

"I do not mind anything," she said, turning away, "as long as there is—no delay."

"Saturday, then," he said quickly; "that's the earliest. Ten in the morning they open. I'll see to it all."

"Saturday," she said, "at ten." She paused an instant; once more that terrible little laugh, which she could not control, broke from her. With an effort she mastered herself. "You know best, Alf. I leave it all to you. I will write to you, Alf, telling you where to find me—for I don't know if I shall be here. But I won't fail you—I won't fail you, on my honour! And now will you please leave me, for I'm very tired. For pity's sake leave me now!"

He had risen to his feet, and looked at her steadily. He caught her hands again, and kissed them. And that was all.

"No one lives who could take you from me now!" he said huskily. "I'm at your orders, Joan. I'll go."

A last look, and he left the room swiftly. Joan sank down beside the table and buried her face in her hands.

It was some time later when Emmie Clegg, in cloak and feathered hat, came into the room. Joan was sitting by the empty hearth. Emmie looked at her curiously, but the girl did not move.

"Feelin' all right, old girl?" said Emmie heartily.

"Yes, dear," said Joan listlessly.

"A bit tired, eh? You sit there an' rest. I'll make some tea."

There was no answer. Emmie bustled about the room, but she glanced at Joan with a puzzled air, and presently came across and put her arms round the girl's shoulders.

"Weren't you goin' to tell me, Joan?" she whispered. "I *know!*"

"Know what, Emmie?"

"Bless the girl, what's wrong with her? That you're goin' to be married o' Saturday!" said Emmie hysterically, "an' I'm to be bridesmaid, Joan!"

"Of—of course I was going to tell you, Emmie," said Joan, with a gulp, "but how did you know?"

"I met him down below, not two hours ago, comin' away from here. He told me."

"You met him, Emmie?" cried Joan.

"Yes. The—the swell." Emmie smiled, but her eyelashes were wet.

"Mister Philip Mottisfont," she said primly. And suddenly she gave Joan a hug like a bear's, laughing and crying all in a breath.

Joan tore herself free.

"Don't, Emmie, for Heaven's sake!" she said brokenly.

"What do you mean? You're goin' to be married?"

"I know I am. To Alfred Blodmore."

"Alf Blodmore!" gasped Emmie. She looked perfectly stunned.

"He was here just now," said Joan quietly. "I sent for him. He still cares for me—why, I don't know. I have given him my promise. On Saturday I shall marry him." She spoke quite calmly.

"Nothing can alter it. I am glad nothing can alter it."

She turned suddenly upon Emmie.

"Why do you look at me like that? Isn't it the one thing in the world that should please you? Were you not always urging me to marry him?"

"I know I was," said Emmie slowly, "an' yet, Mottisfont——"

"Mottisfont!" returned Joan bitterly. "Wasn't it you who said you hated him and all his clan? Who dared to say that he was without honour?"

"I said all that," replied Emmie. "And I take it all back. Because I was a blithering idiot, is that any reason why you should be one?" She came a step nearer. "You love him, an' he loves you. You're going to marry Alf?"

"I have given my word. There is no power can prevent me. In pity's name, no more of it, Emmie!"

"An' turn Mottisfont down?"

"Yes."

"You're a fool!" said Emmie fiercely. "He ain't a swell—he's a gentleman! That man has a heart of gold!"

"Do you think I don't know that?" said Joan wearily.

Without another word she crossed the room, stretched herself on the bed, and turned her face to the wall.

Emmie looked at her, and then stared blankly at the empty pigeon cage.

"This," said Emmie tragically, "is a nice old mess! What in —— am I goin' to do now?"

CHAPTER XXV

THE PRIMITIVE MALE

PHILIP MOTTISFONT entered his chambers in the Temple, carrying a small handbag. The dusk was falling, and a thin fog made the stairs even dimmer than usual. He was dressed from head to foot in black; even his tie was of the same sombre hue. He had spent the last six hours in travelling from the North, and was very stiff and tired.

He barely glanced at the letters awaiting him; the handwriting he hoped to see was not there. He changed quickly into a suit of tweeds and prepared to go out again. Just then the telephone rang.

"That Mr. Mottisfont?" said a grating voice in the receiver.

"Yes. Who's speaking?"

"It's all up," said the voice, very blurred and indistinct. "Joan's gone!"

Click—buzz! said the telephone ironically. The speaker had rung off. No reply could be got. Mottisfont, after one attempt, let go the receiver.

In the streets the fog was making traffic difficult. But it did not delay Philip appreciably. With a stern face and a set jaw he arrived at Emmie's quarters. He found her alone, very pale, her hair disordered, and her eyes showed plainly that she had

been crying. She even shrank a little, when he came in.

"I've failed," she said miserably. "Failed you. You can say what you like to me. She's gone."

"I am not blaming you at all," he replied. "Was that your message?"

"Yes. Sent it from the call-office," she replied dully. "Maybe I'd no right to send it. But I just had to—after what you said to me o' Thursday. She's mad. She's given me the slip—'spite of all."

Emmie took a step nearer to him.

"I never thought to pity you, or help you!" she said in stifled tones, "but I do! I believe she's written you a letter. You'll get it tomorrow—an' then it'll be too late. She's goin' to marry Alf—" Emmie checked herself, and began to cry helplessly.

"Alf?" said Philip slowly, his eyes fixed on her. "Alf?"

With uncanny swiftness his mind travelled back to a certain meeting in the Strand, not so long ago—a quaint-looking bounder in loud tweeds and a cap. There were reminiscences about that meeting. Thence memory retreated farther still, to a boating-party on the river at Clievemead. "Alf" was the essential name for such a personality as that.

"Alf!" he repeated thoughtfully. He turned away from Emmie, whose existence he appeared to have forgotten. There was a long silence.

"You better go," said Emmie in a strangled voice. "There's nothin' you can do. An' you could never understand."

"I beg your pardon," he said quietly. "I understand perfectly."

Emmie stared at him.

"I hate myself for tellin' you," she sobbed. "I'm givin' her away. But she ain't playin' fair," said Emmie fiercely. "She ain't playin' fair! She——"

"Will you oblige me," said Philip, "by leaving out all criticism or censure of Joan. The fault is mine. I am going to put it right. You don't know where Joan is at present?"

"I don't," she muttered. "I might know in the morning. Even then I should not tell you. It's kinder now to leave her alone!"

"I agree," he answered. "I have not the slightest intention of troubling her. The matter is simple. It lies between me and—Alf."

The quiet conviction of his tone took Emmie aback. She had expected an outburst of wrath.

"There is only one thing I require," he said. His tall form stood over her, it seemed to her that he filled the room. "Will you tell me where I shall find—Alf?"

She shook her head.

"He's a friend o' mine," she said huskily, "and a good 'un."

"I understand that, too," he said gravely.

He glanced round the room. An envelope, newly addressed and stamped, lay on the table. The name caught his eye—"Mr. Alfred Blodmore, 90 Billiter Street, Hackney." He lifted the envelope deliberately and looked at it. Emmie, with a startled gesture, made as though to prevent him, but it was too late.

"Oh," he said, tossing the letter down, "saves

time. It was no great matter—I should have found him anyhow—without fail. You need feel no doubt about that."

"It's all beyond me," she sobbed. "I can do nothin'. This is a thing that men must settle between themselves. No woman can help in it."

"I agree with you entirely," said Philip. "What you say is sound sense."

He was moving towards the door, but she stopped him, a sudden fear in her eyes.

"What are you goin' to do?" she cried.

"I cannot tell you that. But I shall see you, most probably, later on. Your good offices will still be required."

He paused after opening the door, and glanced back.

"Do not blame yourself in the least," he said, "for anything that has happened. You are a brick, Emmie! Straight—loyal—honest. But what I most admire is your common sense."

He was gone before she could answer. It was more than an hour's journey to Billiter Street, Hackney, and the fog made it difficult to read the numbers over the houses. Philip walked into Mr. Samuel Taggart's Naturalistic Emporium. The small boy was dozing behind the counter, and Alf was placing covers over bird cages. He turned sharply.

"Mr. Blodmore, I think," said Philip quietly. "I shall be glad of a word with you—in private. My name is Mottisfont."

Alf's eyes grew hard as flint. His face flushed a dark red. For a moment he stared at Philip in silence.

"Come in 'ere!" he said thickly, and turning, led

the way to a wide, whitewashed room at the back of the shop, lit by a flaring gas-jet. Alf lit another gas-jet opposite, with grim deliberation, and then turned to face his visitor.

"Say what you got to say—quick!" he remarked grimly.

"I apologize for troubling you with my private affairs," said Philip. "Tomorrow, however, Joan Tallbois and I are going to be married. I believe it is due to you to know this."

Alf could scarcely get his breath.

"Marry her?" he said dizzily. "You?" He looked round him for support. "Then—she ain't lost her money, after all!"

"It is strange," said Philip reflectively, "how everybody harps on the same thing—and always with just the same emphasis. I begin to find it tedious."

Alf looked at him with the air of a dangerous beast about to spring, and his eyes glowed red.

"I got only one thing to say to you," he said through his teeth. "Joan an' I get married in the morning. Married!"

"It is obvious," said Philip, "that one of us is wrong."

"You're wastin' breath, you dog," said Alf quietly. "I got her word."

"Mine is the prior claim, Mr. Blodmore. Do you care to listen while I tell you why?"

Alf took two quick steps nearer Philip, and glared into his eyes.

"Listen," he said hoarsely, "to you? You swine!

You an' your kid-glove crowd have done her down! An' even now you can't let her alone! I've wanted ter get you to meself like this—Gaw! how I've wanted it! An' now it's come!"

He strode swiftly past, kicked the door to, turned the key, and flung it into a corner. Then he came back to Philip, his hands twitching suggestively.

"She might ha' been happy—long ago—if it hadn't been for you," he said thickly. Alf paused, and his lips drew back from his teeth in a savage snarl. "You dog! There's a quick way out of this. I'll fight you for her!"

Philip smiled.

"Now that," he said pleasantly, "seems to me an excellent suggestion." His hand slid to the top button of his coat.

Alf tore off his jacket and flung it down. In a few moments they were both stripped to the buff. Alf tightened his leather belt.

"Strange," said Philip, "how much more simple sense there is in Lambeth and Hackney than in Mayfair or the Courts of Justice."

Alf advanced towards him.

"I reckon," he said with deadly earnestness, "I'm goin' to kill you afore I leave this room. You need it. It'd be a good bit o' work!"

"It might be satisfactory in a way," replied Philip, "but inconvenient for the survivor. Instead of a wedding he would find himself in the Old Bailey with an eventual two years for manslaughter. These, Mr. Blodmore, are the disadvantages of the times we live in."

He saw that the man was not himself; the lust of killing glared from Alf's eyes. Philip reached down the set of hard and blackened four-ounce gloves that hung on the wall and tossed a pair to his opponent.

Alf laughed aloud.

"Mufflers?" he sneered ferociously. "Frightened, eh?"

Philip laughed. "Consider, Mr. Blodmore. One of us is going to be married in the morning. A bridegroom does not look well with black eyes and an enlarged ear. Imagine the scandalized face of the registrar."

The insane fury in Alf's eyes relaxed a little. He stared and gave a faint chuckle.

"Funny bloke for a lawyer, you are," he said, running his eye over Philip's superb proportions and rippling muscles. "D'you know who you're up against? Sam Taggart's nephew, that outed the Chatham Chicken in the fourth round!"

"So I believe. I remembered it as soon as I heard your name. I was runner-up for the Amateur Championship the year after I came down from Magdalen," said Philip, "but I cannot pretend to be in your class. When you are ready, Mr. Blodmore."

"I'll show you the sort o' meat I make o' your kind!" said Alf, his face darkening again. He took his place, and put his hands up.

"I find you much more interesting, Mr. Blodmore, than I thought I should," replied Philip, and the next moment Alf was upon him like a whirlwind.

He did not pay Philip the compliment of testing him or looking for an opening. He led with a whizzing left and followed it with slam after slam at

lightning speed. Evidently he expected a swift victory. He was not going to waste ring-craft on such an opponent as this.

The thudding of the gloves echoed round the white-washed walls. To Alf's surprise not a single blow came fully home. Philip's guard changed and shifted with deft speed, stalling off the straight-handed drives that would have sent a lighter man flying back against the wall. Alf became aware of a cool, wary blue eye watching him above the guarding arms. The eye annoyed Alf. He lashed out with his right, a full body-swing. Philip side-stepped it and came in with a short-arm left jolt that landed fairly hard under Alf's jaw and made the teeth rattle in his head. The blow should have steadied Alf, but it did not. He saw that Mottisfont was smiling slightly, and at the sight of that face before him, which epitomized everything he hated in the world, the demon in Alf's soul broke loose. All the teaching of his trainer, the iron lessons of self-command, were flung away. He came at Philip with fists driving like the pistons of a racing engine, every blow with the full force of body and arms behind it. A red mist swam before his eyes.

If the first attack was a whirlwind this was a hurricane. It was blind slogging of the most ferocious kind; his one desire seemed to be to drive Philip into the wall and finish him. To avoid those perpetually whizzing gloves was impossible, but Philip's elbows and forearms guarded his body, and though he seemed to swing and sway under the tornado of blows that beat upon his guard, Philip's footwork was

admirable. He did not attempt to reply till, forced back towards the wall Philip side-stepped deftly, brought his left to the mark and whipped his right over in a terrific cross-hit to the jaw. Alf's back and shoulders struck the boards with a bump that made the dust fly.

Philip stood back and drew breath. The young pugilist, tough as wire, was up in three seconds. As if by magic the crazy light had gone out of his eyes, that were now clear and keen as needle-points when he faced his adversary afresh. And though there was dawning respect in them, he looked twice as dangerous an opponent.

"Make the most o' that," he said quietly. "I got you set!"

They met again in the centre of the floor. For half a dozen seconds they felt round each other warily, arms bent, gloves almost touching. Then Alf feinted ever so slightly to the body with his left, and loosed a right upper-cut that came home under Philip's guard with a crash that sent him full length on the floor.

It had all the appearance of a knock-out. Alf pressed in quickly and stood over him, when suddenly Philip, with a bent knee and one hand to the floor, sprang up and ducked under a swing, regaining his feet. He stalled and covered himself desperately against the slashing attack that followed, making a wonderful recovery. Two driving blows over the heart came through his guard before he was fully himself again, and though Philip kept his feet he knew—as he had guessed from the first—that he was

outmatched. Nothing but a miracle could save him from defeat.

The pace was too fierce to last. Philip rallied all his powers with an effort, and attacking once more, drove Alf before him by sheer force. The younger man gave back. There were two chairs in a corner; neither of the fighters realized how close they were upon them. Philip whipped his right for the mark with all his strength, but struck low, flush under the belt. Alf turned white and staggered, his arms wide and the chair catching him behind the knees; his shoulders struck the wall.

"Sorry!" exclaimed Philip, drawing back quickly. "Take your time."

"S'all right," gasped Alf. "I guarded it down."

He gulped, recovered with uncommon quickness and came forward again immediately, gazing at Philip.

"Gaw," he said, "you're a Man! But you gotter go through it!"

The stamp and whirl of the fight proceeded with redoubled energy. Every second it went worse for Philip. Blow upon blow came through his fences. It was only now and then that he could touch his opponent, and then not seriously. The inexorable right slipped again and again through his guard, feeling for his heart. For full three minutes of fierce in-fighting he received a terrible handling. The amount of punishment he took astonished Alf, who, however, felt him failing slowly.

It was the difference between a man fit, powerful, and skilled, but whose trade was not boxing—and

one bred to the game and trained to the ounce. Every trick of ring-craft at Alf's command was brought into play; he was fighting with his head as well as his wrought-steel muscles—fighting with pitiless resolve. Not once did he make the least error.

With drooping guard Philip stood up to the smash and thud of the gloves, bearing up under many a blow that would have broken and dropped a weaker man. His eye was unquelled, yet the room was swimming about him, his face grey-white, the breath all but beaten from his body. Even now he encountered whenever there was a chance. Scarcely able to stand he made a gallant but useless rally; a swinging hit on the jaw staggered him, and Alf's left came home again over his heart.

"Get down—you!" hissed Alf between his teeth between the blows. "Down—an' under! An' when you're down—d'ye hear?—I'm goin' to Joan! You'll be 'ere, but I'm goin' to Joan!—an' then——"

A flush hit on the mouth was the answer. Alf shook his head, and springing in lashed a terrific right and left to the body. Philip reeled, and his arms dropped. Round came Alf's right to the jaw—the blow that Samuel Taggart called a gift.

Philip fell as a bull falls under the pole-axe, and lay still.

Alf looked at him with twitching lips. Then, tearing off his right glove, he snatched the key from the table in the corner. As he came back across the room, Philip moved, staggered to his feet, half fell with his back against the door, and faced him.

It was as though a corpse had stood up. Philip

could not fight; he could scarcely lift his hands, yet he raised them slowly, his head rolled on his shoulders, his voice was a faint rattle in his throat.

"You do not pass," he said, "while there is life left in me."

CHAPTER XXVI

THE VICTOR

ALF heard the faint whisper and drew back his left to strike. One more blow would have crashed Mottisfont onto the panel and dropped him, stunned and finished. But slowly Alf's gloved fist was lowered till it hung at his side.

He stared at the swaying, beaten figure before him, the ferocity faded from his face; something like awe came into his eyes. He was in the presence of a will so indomitable that it passed his comprehension.

For several moments Alf paused, irresolute. He was fighting no longer, but thinking. Suddenly he dragged off his remaining glove and, seizing Philip by the arms, pulled him across the room and thrust him into one of the chairs by the wall.

"Sit there!" he said, and dropped into the chair opposite. "There's somethin' behind all this, that get's me. It's just beyond me! You're a Man! I gotter hear your side." He waited quietly for his rival to recover.

Philip struggled for breath. He leaned across the table, and gripped Alf by the arm.

"Listen, Blodmore," he said, "we are two men, you and I. What is our first object on this earth?

Is it our own desire—or the happiness of the woman we both love?"

Alf said no word.

"I have one question to ask you," said Philip. "Give me an honest answer from an honest man—the answer that is in your heart. Does Joan Tallbois love you? Has she ever loved you?"

An answer trembled on Alf's lips. But it did not pass them. He grew strangely pale, glanced at Philip, and then looked away. There was a tense silence.

"She does not," said Philip gently. "Why, who can say? I think you are the better man. It so happens that she has given me her heart. Little as I deserve it, that great honour has been done me. She is promised to me—she has given me her word. Now, at the eleventh hour, having lost certain things on which some fools of my class place a value, she has made this compact with you because she thinks that I should lose by marrying a girl who is poor. I, who love her, and her only. In an hour of pain, overwrought by suffering, not knowing what she did, Joan has done this thing." His fingers gripped Alf's arm.

"Answer! Can you hold her to a bargain like that?"

Alf rose with a faint gasp. He walked across the room and turned again, his face a conflict of emotions. He stared straight in front of him with unseeing eyes.

"She never loved me," he said under his breath. "I know that."

"Blodmore," said Mottisfont very quietly, "ask yourself, would she be happy with you? Try and put yourself in her place. Could a greater wrong be

done to her—to you—and to me? But think of her first, man! Nothing else matters but that."

Alf's features worked piteously. All arrogance had gone out of him.

"You're askin' something o' me!" he muttered. Suddenly he turned again, almost fiercely, on Philip. "You're askin' something o' me," he said through his teeth. "Put yourself in *my* place. What would you do—you—toff?"

"Heaven knows," said Philip. "You are a man. You have to answer for yourself."

There was a long silence. Alf's face was white and haggard.

"No!" he cried with an oath. "I'm a man an' not a cur. I can't hold her to it!"

He strode right up to Philip.

"You're goin' to marry her?"

"In the morning."

"Marry her!" said Alf thickly, "that's what got me. I didn't believe it. You're a man too—an' I thought you was a beast! You stood up to me—to prove it. An' let me beat the life out o' you! You stand by her now she's down an' out!"

He drew a long breath.

"She's yours! Always been yours—from the first. I stood no chance. God help you to make her happy! An' get out o' here! I hate the sight o' you! I hate——"

Philip stood up. There was admiration in his eyes, and in his heart an intense pity.

Alf unlocked the door with shaking fingers and threw it open.

"'Ere—wait!" he said dully. "What about—her? How're we goin' to fix things? I don't see no way through it."

"I do," replied Philip. "It will be quite simple. Only—she is gone."

Alf considered a moment.

"No good doing things by halves," he muttered; "got to think of her first. I'll tell you where she is."

He approached and said a few words under his breath to Philip, who looked at him, and answered a little huskily.

"Blodmore," Philip said, "there are many things I could say to you. I will leave them all out except this. You are one of the few gentlemen I have ever known."

"Cut that out," muttered Alf. "How are we goin' to make things easier for her? It's a norful mess she's got herself into—for a gal. Don't want her to feel it's her fault."

"We both agree on that."

"Joan's stood all she can stand," said Alf chokily. "You never know what they'll do—when they're like that. Better if she could know nothin' about it—till the last moment."

"My own view, exactly," said Philip gravely.

He looked round the room. The fog was blowing in from the passage. From a peg on the wall hung Alf's old brown overcoat and tweed cap.

"Let me have these," he said. "You can have mine."

A flash of quick intelligence came into Alf's face.

"Take 'em!" he said. "An' look here. You know Emmie Clegg?"

"Do I not!" said Philip with a half smile.

"Well, give Emmie the office! Put it to her straight. She'll see it through. I know who she's backin', an' she knows more about these things than me or you. You can trust Emmie—she's got brains."

"You never said a truer word," replied Philip. He turned, and then hesitating, seemed about to hold out his hand.

Alf shook his head.

"No!" he said, drawing back. "All the same—if things wasn't the way they are—split me if I don't think I could feel a sort o' likin' fer you! I—I wish you wasn't straight goods, for then I could kill you and be done with it. See here! You knew you couldn't beat me. Why did you stand up an' let me bash you the way I did?"

"Why not?" said Philip. "We fought—and I lost. That's all."

"No!" said Alf between his teeth, "you've won! I think you're the sort of bloke that always does win—in the end."

He straightened himself.

"Clear out, Mister Mottisfont!" he said quietly. "I—I'm all right now—I've got meself in hand. Go, before I cut loose agen! There's the door. And," he added briefly, "take care my uncle, Sam Taggart, don't see you!"

"Why?" said Philip, as he passed out.

"Because," replied Alf, a gleam of humour stealing from his eye, "he'd nab you an' train you for the Ring. You're fair thrown away at the Bar, you are!"

Philip strode away down Billiter Street—the win-

ner. But there was a lump in his throat, and his breath came short.

"I have met," he said to himself, "a much better man than I am."

Alf Blodmore, having capped tragedy with a lop-sided jest, went indoors to face alone, in the gas-lit room, the thing that he had done.

. . . . . .

"It ain't exactly," said Emmie Clegg regretfully, "what you would call a swagger turn-out. Not even a white buttonhole for the driver."

Joan, sitting motionless with her back against the dusty cushions, made no reply. An ancient four-wheeled cab was conveying the two girls at a foot-pace through the yellow fog. The time was nine-fifty in the morning, yet the street lamps were lit, and hardly dispelled the murky twilight.

"And the horse," continued Emmie, "looks as if he'd been buried an' dug up again. I'm sorry the turn-out ain't a bit more bridal, Joan, but it's the best I could get. That's the worst of these hasty marriages. Still, the wedding's the thing—that's what I always say."

"Emmie," said Joan faintly, "when did—when did Alf tell you where I was?"

"Never you mind about that, dear," said Emmie. "I'm running this show, an' I don't hold with a lot of explanations. There ain't time for 'em either—we're nearly there. Wouldn't you like a touch up with a bit of swansdown? I've got one in my stocking. A bride ought to be a bit pale, but you're overdoin' it."

Joan made an inarticulate noise and groped for the door handle.

"Stop!" she whispered. "Emmie—Emmie, I can't go on! I'm weaker than I thought. I cannot face it! I can't!"

Emmie removed the hand.

"You got to," she said with dreadful determination. "When I start out to get anybody married, they've got to be married. You stand on me."

"Tell him to stop!" said Joan faintly. "I want to get out. I'd rather walk."

"Not me," said Emmie. "I don't trust you. You'd be off like a hare, an' me chasin' you round a vegetable barrow, an' both of us late for the ceremony. I thought," she added quietly, "you was one to keep your word."

Joan roused herself with a little gasp. There was such a look of terror in her eyes that Emmie glanced at her, and laid a firm hand on her wrist.

"Joan, dear, get a hold on yourself," she said quietly. "I ain't bein' cruel—I'm just gaggin', to wake you out o' that dead-alive state you've got into. Look at me as angry as you like—it's good for you. I'll send you through. You've played the fool, my gal, an' you need sensible folks to keep you straight. I'll tell you one thing."

"What?"

"It ain't goin' to be as bad as you think.'

"I don't know what you mean," said Joan weakly.

"Don't you?" replied Emmie.

The cab stopped. Joan, perfectly dazed, found herself hurried across the pavement, through an open

entrance, into the bare hall of a house. A man was waiting there, a dim figure in the fog. Emmie spoke a word to him, and passed on through the swing doors beyond.

Joan remained behind. She recognized Alf's overcoat and cap, though she could scarcely see the wearer's face. A storm rose in her heart. Suddenly Joan felt her will give way utterly.

"Alf!" she said, trembling, "I am here. I thought I could do this—but I can't! Will you not let me go? And yet—if you keep me to it—I will not break my word."

"No," he answered, "you shall not break your word."

Joan shrank back with a little cry of fear.

"Philip!" she said, panic-stricken. "What are you doing here?"

He was between her and the door. His eyes looked into hers with an infinite tenderness; there was a half smile on his lips.

"I am wearing the coat of a rare good fellow," he said, "but I am just—Philip."

"Where is Alf?" she said trembling.

"Alf," he said quietly, "all honour to him, bids you go where your heart is. Where is that, Joan?"

She trembled violently. His hand was on her shoulder, steady and firm.

"Some day," he said, "you shall understand. It is a good story, of a good man. In his place, Lord help me, I could not have given you up! They are waiting to marry us, Joan."

Her face flamed pink, and grew pale again.

"Now—after this?" she whispered. "Philip!"—she tried to draw away—"I will not! I dare not!"

"But I dare," he said, "and I will. Come!"

Power of will and speech failed her. From that moment she realized only vaguely what was happening. The passage was left behind; she stood by Philip's side before a desk in a dark, drab room. There was only one colour-point in the room—the flaming red hair of Emmie, who was close by her, a silent, prim little witness.

The Registrar, an elderly man with features like parchment and a pair of steel-rimmed spectacles, peered with a kindly wonder at the face of the bride. To Joan it was all like some amazing dream. A mist of words reached her. And gradually the words took shape and meaning. She heard her own voice answering:

"I, Joan, take thee, Philip——"

The drab room seemed to fill with golden light. A holy joy welled up in Joan's heart; her voice, that had faltered, grew clear and strong:

". . . To be my lawful wedded husband . . ."

Outside the fog was lifting; a straggling sun-ray, the richer for its shroud of thinning smoke, stole through the window and fell upon the couple who stood with bowed heads.

Slowly the wonder-dream came to an end. Joan heard the kindly old man with the steel spectacles talking in a subdued but heartening voice. A pen was in her fingers; she signed with a steady hand. The room faded, she found herself in the white-washed passage. Philip drew her to him and looked into her eyes.

"My wife!" he said. "Joan, are you happy?"

"Happy!" she breathed. "Philip, I am yours—yours!"

"Mine," he said, "from the beginning, now, and for all time. Out into the world together, Joan, you and I. The greatest gift in life is ours; we shall love each other as long as there is love under heaven. Joan—my Joan!"

He pressed his lips to hers, and released her, leading her to the entrance. Emmie came out swiftly through the swing doors, and, taking Joan by the hands, kissed her on the forehead.

"Take her away, Philip!" she said, "right away out of it all—an' God bless you both!"

She held her hand out suddenly to him. He gripped the freckled paw and held it.

"Thank you, little friend," he said.

Joan found herself led quickly across the pavement. The old four-wheeler was gone; in its place stood a small, neat, closed car, with the driver sitting in front like a graven image.

From out the thinning fog a tall, clean-shaven man who looked like a superior type of loafer, came suddenly forward and opened the door of the car. Joan was too far immersed in wonderland to notice him, but Philip, after helping her into the car, looked up and recognized Goodenough, the footman of Knayth. His face was haggard and white, but there was a light of triumph in his deep-set eyes.

"You!" said Philip slowly. He stared at the ex-footman. "What are you doing here—honest man?"

"I have found what I sought. I owe you, sir, a deep apology," said the footman with bowed head. He held the door a little wider. Philip, utterly puzzled, got in.

Goodenough closed the door quietly and watched the car drive away.

"Thank God for this," said Goodenough under his breath.

Emmie Clegg came forth from the registry office singing. She saw the tall man standing on the curb, and thought she heard what he said.

"Hullo!" she said, "who's this?"

Goodenough, without looking at her or moving, replied with two lines from a singer not unknown to fame:

> "Damned from here to Eternity,
> Lord, have mercy on such as we. . . ."

Emmie stared, and with her hands on her hips planted herself right in front of him.

"I know your face!" she said. "Who are you?"

"The Peri without the Gates, madam," he replied gravely.

"You look more like a ghost," said Emmie.

She felt in her purse.

"Stand yourself a bit of weddin' cake, Peary," she said. "This is a joy-bells day, although you mayn't know it. Here's a bob for you."

The tall man touched his hat humbly, took the shilling, and walked away into the fog.

. . . . . .

"Say," remarked Agnes Tallbois serenely, as she stepped out of a first-class carriage at Waterloo Station, "haven't I made this town hump itself?"

"You have, indeed," said Drummond; "as the inspiration of special editions of the Press, Agnes, I should say you hold all records. The second Tallbois Peerage Claim is the biggest sensation since the War."

"And you're sure," she persisted, "I've got a certainty?"

"An absolute certainty."

"Aren't you glad, Harold?" she said softly.

"For your sake, Agnes," he answered in a lower voice, "I am more glad than I express in words."

Her dark eyes scanned his face a little wistfully.

"I guess I'm glad for yours, Harold," she murmured.

The understanding between Agnes Tallbois and Drummond had in a week blossomed forth with tropical luxuriance. Agnes was not given to being secretive about her preferences; Drummond, though in many ways she jarred upon him, seemed drawn to her as by a lodestone. The magnet, doubtless, was of gold; yet her bizarre nature and tigerish beauty had a fascination for Drummond that mounted to his head like strong wine.

"You'll steer me, won't you?" she said quietly. "I know there's lots of things I'm not wise to. And I trust Callaghan an' his gang as far as I can sling them. But you—you're different. You say I can't lose this case. When I've won it, you'll come an' help me, down at Knayth. I like Knayth. The real goods—same as you read about. But I'll make Knayth hum!"

"You have been to Knayth Abbey!" he exclaimed.

"Didn't you know?" Agnes laughed. She told him in pungent language of her flying visit and the interview with Joan Tallbois. It lost nothing in the telling. Drummond looked amazed.

"I had to see that girl," said Agnes, "and hand her the mitt. She'd have held me off for keeps if it hadn't been for your crowd. Can't you guess how she gets my goat—the pink-faced doll with her staring blue eyes! She looked at me as if I was a—" Agnes's white teeth clicked together, and her dark pupils blazed. "When I don't like people, Harold, I—don't like 'em."

"By Jove!" said Drummond. "I wonder if that was the reason she cleared out?"

"Has she done that?"

"Yes. She has cut the whole thing, and gone back to the riff-raff she used to live with, somewhere south of the Thames. Callaghan has told me. That's all he knows—he doesn't take much interest in her now. By the way, you have nothing to fear from her whatever; her lawyers are only putting up a formal defence to the case."

"Quit, eh? She told me she would, but I didn't believe it. Though she knew she'd got no show, of course. I haven't done with her yet! So it's the sidewalk for her, is it?" The girl chuckled. "Say—has she got a feller?"

"A what? Oh—yes," said Drummond. "Mottisfont—the barrister who won her case for her in the House of Lords. A well-known K.C. They were to have been married at St. George's next week."

"Huh! A swell, eh? Rich?"

"He would have been as the husband of Lady Tallbois," said Drummond drily. "A clever fellow. A climber. I'm afraid you've upset that little arrangement, Agnes."

Agnes's expression changed. She stared straight before her.

"Gee!" she muttered. "That's tough for her, ain't it? It—it sure is!"

Drummond looked at Agnes in momentary surprise. But they were passing through the ticket gate at the moment, and just then he caught sight of a smartly dressed woman buying a paper at the bookstall. It was Hilda Detchmere.

"By Jove!" murmured Drummond. He turned to his companion. "Agnes, here is precisely one of the people you need to know. Will you excuse me while I speak to her a moment?"

"Sure," said Agnes briefly. She watched with interest while Drummond stepped across and spoke to the girl in the silver-fox cloak.

"Well, Hilda," he said quietly, "have I made good? There is a little wager between us, I think, which you will not be sorry to have lost."

"Harold! You?" said Hilda, under her breath. They drew clear of the crowd; there was a sparkle in Hilda's eyes. "Yes, you have won, indeed, and never shall I pay a debt more gladly. You are wonderful! How did you know of it? Was it your doing? But I must not ask you questions."

"For the moment," said Drummond, "you must be content with what you see in the newspapers.

The case comes on shortly. It is an absolute certainty for the new claimant—Agnes Tallbois."

"What is she like?" asked Hilda quickly. "You have seen her?"

"She is here, in the station. May I bring her to you, Hilda?"

"But you are priceless!" said Hilda. "By all means; it is just what would interest me." She hesitated. "Is she very——?"

"Yes," said Drummond drily, "she is, rather. I need your help, Hilda. One moment, and I will——"

"Stop! What of Joan?" said Hilda under her breath. "The adorable Lady Tallbois—our late social star? That is what I want to hear!"

Agnes had quietly joined them, but neither of them noticed her.

"Fled," said Drummond briefly. "Bolted—wouldn't face it. Really, the only thing for her to do. Wounded dove, you know—hide her bleeding heart, and all that sort of thing. Gone back to the slums of Lambeth. Straight from Knayth to the gutter—is that good enough for you, Hilda?"

Hilda Detchmere drew a deep breath. She would have given much to be able to answer the question, and say what she really did think. Waterloo Station was an inconvenient place in which to receive news so stupendous.

"And Mottisfont?" she murmured.

Drummond laughed.

"A little disappointing for Mottisfont. Kept well out of the way. What we should all do, Hilda, in his place. Wise man, Mottisfont."

"Ah-h-h-h!" said Hilda, and she began to laugh, quietly, gently, in the most perfectly self-possessed manner. And then she looked straight before her, and seemed to become suddenly petrified. Drummond followed her gaze.

Joan Tallbois herself, in a simple linen frock, was passing within twenty feet of the pair at that moment. She saw neither of them. The crowds, the noise, the bustling life around, did not seem to exist for her. There was a wonderful dreamy happiness in her eyes, as she passed through towards the Dover boat-train.

Behind her came Philip, carrying a bag, and followed by a porter with a truck of luggage. Drummond and Miss Detchmere, after the first shock of amazement, glanced quickly at each other.

Philip paused only long enough to toss a coin onto the bookstall and snatch up a paper. His eye fell on Hilda, and he raised his hat.

"Philip!" she ejaculated, as if speech was wrung from her. "Where are you going?"

"On my wedding-tour," he answered. Hilda's face was colourless and rigid.

"On your—*what?*" she gasped

"Joan Tallbois and I were married this morning," he said. "I accept your congratulations. Thank you so much."

And raising his hat again courteously, Philip strode forward onto the platform as though the earth and the fullness thereof were his.

CHAPTER XXVII

THE SACRIFICE

"HAPPY, Phil?" said Joan drowsily. "*Quite* sure?"

"Don't I look happy?" murmured Philip Mottisfont.

Joan lifted her head, which was reclining comfortably against Philip's shoulder, and looked up into his face.

"You do," she said thoughtfully. "You look happier than I should have thought it possible for anybody to be—except me. I can't understand it. You ought to be perfectly miserable."

Philip twined a chestnut curl over his finger and kissed it. They were sitting among purple-tinted bracken in the autumn sunshine upon the hill above Arques-la-Battaille, which is one of the fairest prospects in Normandy. A little river wound through the green plain below like a turquoise ribbon.

"It's so simple," said Philip. "The great thing is to know exactly what one wants. When you're sure of that you just go straight ahead, never turning aside until you've got it. Whatever gets in the way has to be flattened out. That's all." He took her face gently between his hands and smiled at her. "I wanted you, Joan, more than anything else that ever happened on earth from the first day I saw you,

dear. And I have you—and I will never let you go."

He kissed her gently, and smoothed back her hair.

"And you've never a regret?" she whispered. "I couldn't be happy, Philip, if you were not."

Philip held her to him and told her, for the hundredth time, what her heart thirsted to hear—what she knew, yet could never be told often enough. Nor did he ever weary of telling it. In the old days at Knayth she never knew how wonderfully Philip could make love. Joan gave a little sigh of utter contentment.

"It isn't as if I deserved any of it," she murmured. "I know what I am and what ought to happen to me. Sometimes I wish you'd scold me, Philip, or beat me a little."

Mottisfont laughed.

"You always treat me as if I were perfect," she complained. "If you knew——"

"No, you aren't quite perfect," he laughed. "You'd be rather dull if you were."

"Ah! You're going to scold me at last," said Joan. "Go on, Philip. What have I done?"

"Well," he said twinkling, "you tried to break a very solemn promise and get out of the unpleasant business of marrying me; you gave me quite a lot of worry and running around. However, that doesn't matter——"

"I thought it was best for you, Philip."

"Best for me! Great heavens! But then there was Alf Blodmore. You did really almost deserve a little beating for that, Joan. You didn't treat old

Alf too well. One of the best fellows I've ever known."

"I suppose I didn't," murmured Joan. "I ought to have let him alone; he was forgetting all about such a little fool as I was. I know how good Alf is at heart."

"I wonder if you do. Well, he's gone back to the Ring, and I think he'll hammer the memory of it out of himself. He's tough enough. A splendid chap. I wish I could do something for him. But a man can't help another man in a case like that. It would be an insult to try."

"You never told me what really happened."

"He gave me," chuckled Philip, "the best licking I ever had in my life."

Joan did not rest till she had forced him to tell her something of what occurred at Billiter Street, in the whitewashed room behind the shop. Philip related it in such a way as to hold up his rival for a mirror of chivalry and honour. Alf Blodmore shone forth from that tale as the perfect knight. Joan's eyes glistened and grew wet. But her arms tightened round her husband.

"He was splendid," she whispered, "and yet—I know who won that fight—and why. You went through all that for me?"

"I like fighting," said Philip, "when there's something worth fighting for. I met my Waterloo, yet I got both less and more than I deserved. Strange, isn't it?" He took her by the hands, and raised her to her feet. "Let's get back to the house, Joan. Do you know we have been in this little paradise of ours ten whole weeks? I only realized it today."

"It has seemed like ten hours," sighed Joan.

"Not that, to me. And there's the *facteur* coming up the hill. I expect he'll have the London papers."

It was, in fact, the French postman who arrived a little before Joan and Philip at the pretty chalet on the slope which was their headquarters. A neatly dressed *bonne* was setting out afternoon tea on the oak table in the sitting-room—a concession to the habits of the mad but delightful English.

The London newspapers had arrived. Philip picked up one of them, and was about to open it. But he paused, and hesitated. He knew too well what he was likely to see. And Joan was in the room.

England was no place for Joan, just then. The Tallbois Peerage Claim had moved rapidly. Already, for some weeks, the case had been before the courts.

Philip Mottisfont, K.C., had taken no part in it whatever. He had consulted with Langley, Joan's solicitor, before he left England—before he even found Joan at Lambeth. He had convinced himself that the De Castra-Tallbois claim was genuine—that the issue was perfectly simple and indefensible.

It would still have been possible, by legal jugglery, to throw delays and obstacles in the way. But Joan had already refused to sanction that, and it was the only honest course. Mr. Langley had her case in hand, and a counsel had been briefed—though with no hope of success, unless by a miracle.

"For me, of all men living," said Philip to himself, "it has been impossible to appear in this case. Utterly impossible. Joan understands."

He snicked off the cover suddenly with his finger.

A big, black headline on the newspaper shouted aloud for his attention:

TALLBOIS CASE DECISION

THE NEW CLAIMANT WINS

The entire page was taken up with the case; everything was given in the fullest detail. A flaring portrait of Agnes De Castra, Viscountess Tallbois of Knayth, occupied the centre. Eighteen days the case had lasted; the court had taken no chances this time. And it had found the claim of Agnes Tallbois proved beyond all shadow of possibility of a doubt. She was the first-born and only legitimate child of William Travers Tallbois.

The gentlemen of the Press had "spread themselves" to some purpose. There were interviews, comments, descriptions; all in broad-splashed colours. There was even half a column devoted to Philip and Joan Mottisfont.

They were alone in the little room. Joan, wondering why Philip was so silent, came and looked over his shoulder. She saw the headlines. A sharp sob rose in her throat.

"It is over, then," she said. "It is finished."

"Finished," replied Philip quietly, "settled finally. Nothing could alter it, Joan; we knew that it must come."

"Let me see!" she said, reaching for the paper. "Let me read it!"

He looked at her and saw how pale she was. The old, feverish gleam was in her eyes, that he had

almost forgotten. Deliberately Philip crushed up the newspaper between his big hands and thrust it into the fire, where it caught and flared up the chimney. Then he took her in his arms and held her tightly.

"Does it hurt you, darling?" he whispered. "Is it very hard to bear? I am so sorry for you, Joan—so sorry, dear."

"For me?" she said. "It is less than nothing. But for you!" She stole a swift glance at his face. "It was for you I wanted it so. That is all."

"I care for it," he said, steadily and with sure conviction, "as much as I do for those ashes in the grate—so much and no more."

"Ah, you are good to me—you are good to me!" she said wildly. "Never was there any one like you, Philip. Down falls the curtain on it all, then—we neither of us care. I am too happy for the world to touch me."

For some time there was silence. When Philip spoke again his voice took a grimmer note.

"There is one thing," he said, "that remains, and which rouses the most intense bitterness in me. It is the knowledge of all that misery which was caused you through the action of that scoundrel who called himself Bell, and his confederate. Though there's never a jot of proof of it, I believe they knew your position from the first. There has been vile work behind all this, Joan."

She did not answer. His bitterness found no echo in her. She did not seem to care.

"I will not rest," he said, "till I have brought those men to justice and punishment."

"Must you?" she said slowly. "I thought all that was done with. I should have to go into the witness-box I suppose. All the old wretchedness and pain will be raked up again." He felt her trembling. "I wonder if I can stand it, Philip."

He was brought up with a round turn.

"That is an obstacle," he said under his breath. "I will never let you suffer, Joan. Your happiness is my first care. But I shall find a way—when we return to England."

"Must you?" she said dully. A sense of foreboding crept over her. Suddenly Philip kissed her and laughed.

"Tea!" he said, guiding her to the table. "Come on, the tea is spoiling. Away with care! These are our halcyon days."

He banished all trouble in the masterful way he had, and in an hour Joan had forgotten the passing shadow as though it had never been. She asked him no more questions. The lost peerage and all connected with it had dropped out of sight.

There was another fortnight of sunshine and happiness. To whatever plans there might be for the future, Joan gave no thought or care. She was content to leave everything to Philip, serene in the conviction of his strength. Under the shelter of his love there was safety and peace. It was a blissful sensation, such as she had never known in the brief days of splendour.

At last Joan and Philip returned to England, reaching London amid rain, wind, and darkness. They arrived at a little furnished house in Highgate, which

Philip had secured some time before by telegram. It was within half an hour of everywhere by tube, and was simple, neat, and cosy; a solitary maid in attendance. Joan, who insisted on relieving the maid of most of her duties, was delighted with the place.

Five days passed there, uneventful but pleasant days for Joan. Philip spent nearly all his time with her; twice he was away for several hours; she guessed he was at the Temple, but felt that he did not wish to be questioned, and she was quite content, for to all appearance he was in the best of spirits. Joan did not care to make any journey to the West End; she did some shopping in Highgate. She wrote to Emmie Clegg—her husband urged her to do so—and asked her to come and see them, where a warm welcome awaited her.

On the day following his arrival, Philip went to Scotland Yard. He was received by one of the highest officials of that sanctuary—Commissioner Somers Mervyn. Mervyn, who was a friend of long-standing, gripped Philip sympathetically by the hand.

"I presume you do not know how every decent man admires you, Mottisfont," he said. "But—why go into retirement, as you have done?"

"For the present," said Philip quietly, "no choice is left me."

Mervyn nodded.

"I got your letter from Dieppe," he said. "I have acted upon it. There seems to me no doubt that your wife has been infamously treated by that man, Vaille, and his obvious confederate, Theophilus Bell,

the shady lawyer. I believe there has been criminal conspiracy here; greater even than you suggest. I fear it will be immensely difficult to prove; I only wish I had known earlier. I suppose Mrs. Mottisfont was loath to face the publicity."

"I am equally loath for her; I want you to avoid that as far as you may, Mervyn. But justice must be done; the thing is too infamous. What do you know of these two men?"

"That they are, we believe, efficient tools in the hand of a much bigger personality—one Callaghan, who is suspected of being the power in the background of several very ugly mysteries which—we are speaking in confidence—have baffled the police. There is a touch of genius in Callaghan. We have never been able to get a rag of evidence against him. Yet, with this last affair in hand, I would have arrested him and the other pair as well. I believe it might be the means of bringing not only this, but worse things home to them."

"Then you have not arrested them?"

"You touch a raw spot, Mottisfont—I still speak in confidence. Not only Callaghan, but Vaille and Bell have eluded us. They have given us the slip; completely disappeared, and till now I can find no trace of them. It looks as if they were already aware of what was in the wind. If Callaghan is, indeed, a master of crime, his organization must be amazing. But we shall have them yet. Give me all details of what you know in your wife's case."

Mottisfont did so. The recital took some time, and the young K.C. made his points very clearly.

Mervyn took full notes, and at the end he whistled softly.

"Let me lay my hands on Callaghan, and his career is finished," he said, and he looked still more sympathetically at Philip. "You're in a tight place, too, Mottisfont, though only in the civil courts. There's an easy way out for you."

"Is there?" said Philip grimly, rising. "I see none."

"At least, I hope to avenge you. Keep in close touch with me, and we should soon have news."

. . . . . .

Philip went to his chambers, and returned to Highgate in the evening. He said nothing about the Scotland Yard interview to his wife.

It was a few days later, however, that Joan's watchful eye detected that something was troubling Philip. Always tender and considerate when with her, and apparently cheerful, yet he had grown markedly pale during the last few days, and there were grim lines about his mouth at times, when he thought she was not looking.

At once Joan's suspicions were aroused. There had been a heavy post that morning, and among other things she had noticed a long envelope with the address of Langley's office printed on the flap. Presently she stole into the little room at the back where Philip did his writing. He was sitting silent before a table littered with legal papers, his head on his hand. Joan, who had entered very quietly, glanced at the documents and changed colour.

"Philip!" she said, "I have been silent too long. Tell me, dear, what is the matter."

He started, and slid a newspaper, as if casually, over the documents.

"It is nothing, Joan," he said. "Just a matter of business. I will not have you worried with it."

"But I know!" she said, deeply agitated. "I saw those papers." She laid her hands on his shoulders. "I have never interfered in your affairs, dear, but this concerns me. It is about my debts to the Knayth estate!"

"It is that," he said composedly. "But I tell you that I can square it all up and put it right. I ask you just to leave it to me."

"But I can't, Philip! Please, there must be no secrets between us. You must tell me about it. They want the money I had to be paid back?"

There was a long pause. He saw it was useless to fence with her.

"Yes, if you must know. Nominally the papers are yours, but I am dealing with them, Joan, and you are not to let this bother you. Briefly, it's a claim by Lady Tallbois' solicitors—of course on her instructions—for the repayment of money spent. It's no surprise; I always expected it."

"They know I cannot pay—I have nothing, now!" cried Joan. "Surely they can't do this? It's cruel—wicked!"

"It is the law," said Philip, "and I cannot say it is an unjust law. To appeal for mercy to that little tiger-cat at Knayth would be utterly useless—and unthinkable."

"How much is it?"

He refused to answer, but she became so agitated that he judged it was better to tell her the whole truth.

"About thirty-five thousand pounds. And, once for all, Joan, you can put it out of your mind, little girl. You say I'm worried, but the whole thing isn't giving me the hundredth part the concern it's giving you. You didn't spend much. Of course, the thirty thousand was what you paid to Vaille and Bell. You gave it of your own free will. At the time, I know, it seemed to you right to do so."

"Can it not be got back from them?" she exclaimed. "Even I can see now what folly mine was. As things are, they've no right to it."

He smiled grimly.

"Then what is to be done, Philip?"

"Must you know? Well, I shall pay it. That's all."

"You!" she cried. "I will not hear of it! Listen, Philip, I had always an inkling this might happen—ignorant though I am. I can go bankrupt—I must, for I haven't a penny. 'Through the courts,' don't they call it? And that would clear me and finish it all."

"Through the court—yes," said Philip.

"So that is what I shall do! It is settled."

"No!" said Philip with decision. "I am a member of the Bar. I utterly refuse to consent to that. We have the money. It shall be paid."

"You are my husband. They cannot claim from you."

"No. But they shall be paid."

"Philip!"

He rose, and took her quietly by the arms.

"My wife's honour," he said, "is my honour."

"I say you shall not!" she gasped. "It is quixotry—madness, Philip! Dearest, it is worse folly than mine was!"

"Then," he said gently, taking her in his arms, "let us be two fools together, Joan."

She was frightened. She tried desperately to shake his decision, she argued and pleaded. But he was adamant. She began to realize the limitations of Philip. So far she could command him, but no farther. It seemed to her a mad thing for him to do, but Philip Mottisfont, K.C., had said his say. He had some money, and could, doubtless, raise the rest. He refused to keep it in hand while his wife became a bankrupt. Financiers might do it—he was not a financier.

"You can't pay it, Philip!" she said with returning hope.

"But I can. I had my savings, and my uncle—who died while I was away from you, Joan—left me money. There's twelve thousand in all. And my income from the Bar—for what it's worth. I can raise the rest, Joan. I'll show you whether the world can beat me."

Never had Philip been more tender and gentle with Joan than he was during that evening. Next morning he left early for the City. But strong and confident as he was, Philip had to learn that he could not defeat Fate. He had underestimated his diffi-

culties. The next three days were very anxious ones, and late one evening he returned home with bitter lines about his mouth and his eyes deep set. Joan immediately diagnosed disaster. He attempted to evade her questions, but Joan was too much for him.

"I have failed," he said dully. "I cannot raise the money. With all there is, I shall be eighteen thousand pounds short. And they will not give me time. It's sheer vindictiveness. But I will not endure the bankruptcy. I have to mortgage my income."

His face was very white.

"My back is to the wall," he said under his breath, "and—things are not going well with me at the Bar. This break may mean disaster—poverty—for Joan and me."

Joan sank into a chair and covered her face with her hands.

"It is I who have brought this on you," she said trembling.

"No, no!" said Philip quickly. "Dear heart, the fault was not yours. Yet there is one thing I cannot help but say," he added with sudden bitterness. "It is ill bearing a grudge against the dead, but I wonder such a man as William Tallbois was ever allowed to walk the earth! All this wretchedness you have endured, my dear one—you and who knows how many others—was caused by his sin. And still the tragedy goes on; there seems no end to it. I never thought I was vindictive. But no punishment devised by God or man could be too deep for such as he was!"

Joan uncovered her face and stared before her.

"No," she said, "I cannot say that."

He looked at her quickly.

"Have I said what I ought not? Forgive me. I was not myself. But surely, Joan, even you, in your heart, cannot feel forgiveness for him. There are things past pardon."

Joan was silent.

"For a while," she said at last, "I felt as you do. Not for any loss of what might have been mine, Heaven forbid. But for the way he treated my mother. The mother that bore me. And yet——"

She rose to her feet unsteadily.

"Even now, I cannot condemn. For I feel that I do not know the truth, Philip! Who am I that I should judge? Let those without sin cast the first stone."

Philip winced.

"Amen to that," he said.

There was a ring at the front door bell. Neither of them noticed it.

"The truth—the facts!" said Joan in a breaking voice. "I feel that these are still hidden from me!"

"Well," he said quietly, "we have to face facts now." A rap sounded on the door. "Yes—come in!"

The maid entered with a package on a tray.

"A gentleman left this, sir," she said. "It was to be given to you immediately. He left no name, and did not wait."

"No name?" said Philip in surprise. The parcel was addressed to him. "What was he like?"

"It was too dark to see, sir. A very tall gentleman."

The maid went out. Philip cut open the parcel, which was done up securely in wrapper after wrapper. He gave a cry of blank astonishment. A thick roll of bank-notes fell upon the table. They were for five hundred pounds each. He counted them.

"There are twenty thousand pounds here!" he said dazedly.

Joan, wondering if she were dreaming, came to his side and picked up one of the notes. She stared at it with wide eyes.

"Philip!" she gasped, "these are the notes I paid to Vaile! I took the numbers as a safeguard—I remember them even now! Philip, this is wonderful! What does it mean?"

Philip was too dumbfounded to answer. He searched eagerly through the wrappers, seeking some clue to the mystery. A sense of joy and relief dawned in him, too deep for words. There was nothing else in the package, save one half sheet of note-paper with seven words pen-printed on it in large black capitals:

TO THAT *RARA AVIS*, AN HONEST MAN.

CHAPTER XXVIII

THE HALLS OF HER ANCESTORS

LADY TALLBOIS gazed at the wide south front of Knayth Abbey with mingled admiration and disparagement.

"It's great!" she said. "Harold, this is some house. Mine—an' I'll never lose it. The home of the Talbois! When I'm here, I'm It! But gee! It's old and mouldy. I guess I'll brush some of the mould off before I've done!"

"I should say you will," agreed Drummond a trifle gloomily, "if you go on as you've begun."

It was Agnes's début at Knayth. The staff was still more or less intact, though, as Drummond had carefully ascertained, the footman, John Goodenough, was no longer a member of it; he had disappeared on the day Joan left. And Mr. Deane was no longer in charge. He had sent in his resignation.

"The place would give me the fan-tods if I were here alone," pursued Agnes. "Even with you, Harold, it's ghostly. But we'll liven it up," she added, as a motor turned in through the distant park gates. "Here's the first guest, an' that'll be Mrs. Blessington's automobile. There'll be plenty of tone now, I guess."

Drummond smiled uneasily. He had been ordered

to collect a house-party of representative people for Agnes's celebration at Knayth. There was, however, a difficulty. Whatever the verdict on the dethroned Joan, Society had distinctly shied at her successor. It was too early for such a *volte-face*, and Agnes's vindictiveness at the trial of the Tallbois case, combined with one or two startling escapades in London, had put anything of that sort out of the question.

Drummond had only been able to get together such dubious people as every man-about-town knows; they passed very well with Agnes, who, quite untrained in such matters, took them for what they appeared to be.

The first to arrive was Mrs. Blessington, a strikingly handsome and ultra-smart dame, who had a year before been the heroine in a *cause célèbre* that filled the Sunday newspapers. She brought two companions with her, and greeted Agnes effusively.

Lord Castleshannon, a penniless Irish peer who lived by his wits, came shortly afterwards. Then appeared Mr. Montague Flack, large, heavy, expensively dressed. Mr. Montague Flack was a bookmaker, who also owned a small stable of selling-platers, which other people financed. After him came Vyner Datchett, the famous pigeon-shot, noted also for his perfect clothes; he brought three large suit-cases and one small valet. By the time the entire house-party had arrived there were eight men and five women, all outwardly presentable at first glance. In actual fact, a more representative collection of social outcasts, blackballed to perpetuity, could not have been raked out of London.

It is not necessary to linger over the events of the afternoon. Castleshannon raided the stables, and some scratch races were organized in the park. Agnes, whose eyes were shining with excitement, was made much of to her face, and laughed at very thoroughly behind her back. Several of the guests attempted to get her to themselves for various reasons of their own, but they were detached by the watchful Drummond, who was more than a match for any of them.

Agnes's mother had accompanied her to Knayth, but that retiring lady kept humbly out of the way, and even dined in her own room.

Throughout the day, in fact, Drummond steered her tactfully through all the difficulties; she recognized his aid, and was more than grateful. There were many quaint incidents, but nothing startling happened until dinner, when Lady Tallbois appeared in an evening gown of pale pink silk, a diamond star over her forehead, and took her place at the head of the table.

The Veuve Clicquot of the Knayth cellars flowed like water, and the meal was somewhat riotous. Mr. Pond, the butler, though preserving an outward calm, almost wept to see the sort of company that was consuming his choicest vintages. Pond had a fine sense of social values, and had quickly sized up the guests upon whom he was waiting.

Towards the end of dinner Lord Castleshannon rose to his feet, his eyes nearly as pink as Lady Tallbois' gown, and turned towards her with a brimming glass in his hand.

"I call upon you all," he said, "to wish long life and happiness to our charming hostess."

"Hear! hear!" said Mr. Montague Flack with a vinous leer at Agnes.

"Who," continued Castleshannon ardently, "enjoys her own at last, in spite of those who sought to keep her out of it, and after a career sparkling with romance! She is the last and most exquisite flower of the princely race of Tallbois."

He delivered a flowery speech which, extravagant though it was, made Agnes flush and laugh with pleasure. For some time past she had been strangely silent and ill at ease. The toast was received with acclamation, all standing up.

"It brings tears to my eyes," concluded the proposer, "to see her in the halls of her ancestors, surrounded by all the splendour that could only have been matched in its day by that of Castleshannon, County Limerick."

"There is one thing, Michael, that you could never have matched there," said Drummond smiling.

"What's that?" said his lordship, refilling his glass.

"The Knayth Goblet."

"Why!" cried Mrs. Blessington, "that's the famous chalice Benvenuto designed, isn't it? The one that only the Tallbois can drink from?"

"May we see it, Lady Tallbois?" clamoured the guests.

"The Knayth Goblet!" ejaculated Agnes. "Ain't that it yonder in the wall? They sent me the keys. Have it down here, Harold."

She gave Drummond the key, and he brought the

Goblet from its niche and set it beside her on the table, its clear crystal sparkling above the superb jewels studding its stem. It had not been taken down since it signalized Joan's entry into her brief, ill-fated reign at Knayth.

"Gee!" said Agnes, "ain't it a beaut!" She lifted and admired the wonderful toy. "Fill it up, you!" she said to Mr. Pond. "I'll return the toast with it. Red wine—not the fizzy stuff!"

The butler filled the crystal cup with claret. Silence fell as Agnes stood up and deftly curved her slim fingers with the opal-tinted nails about the pierced jewels of the stem.

For a moment she stood hesitating, as though mentally seeking some impressive words with which to answer Castleshannon's toast. The words refused to come.

"Here's luck!" she said suddenly, "to the true and only Lady Tallbois!"

She lifted the Goblet, but the wine never reached her lips. As she tilted it, the fluid streamed and spurted over her hands, reddening the bosom of her dress as if with blood.

Agnes stood as if stupefied. Her face darkened. With a sharp cry of rage she flung the Goblet to the floor, where it dashed into a hundred glittering fragments.

. . . . . .

The long dining-hall was empty. The fragments of the Goblet had been swept away, the scattered jewels gathered. The lights were turned low.

Agnes came into the room very quietly, as though seeking a refuge where she could be alone. From the distant billiard-room came the murmur of voices and laughter. Lady Tallbois' guests had been partly amazed and partly appalled, but wholly amused, by Agnes's outbreak and her exploit with the Goblet. They were not the people to let it trouble them, however, and finally had passed out and settled down to amuse themselves, indifferent whether their hostess joined them.

Lady Tallbois was as pale as her dark complexion would ever allow her to be, and wore a strangely forlorn look. After staring dumbly round the room she dropped into an arm-chair.

"I don't know," she muttered, "that I'm getting anything out of it, after all."

She drew a deep breath.

"I don't seem to have any luck," murmured Agnes.

Suddenly she covered her face with her hands and began to sob brokenly.

Presently the door opened gently, and Drummond looked in with an anxious face. He saw the mournful figure in the chair, and came quickly across.

"Agnes," he said softly, "what's the matter?"

"Everything," said Agnes in stifled tones. "Is it you, Harold?"

She brought her hands down and gave a little shiver.

"I—I thought you might come. I'm just miserable.

"I've been thinking," she muttered, "that, maybe, I was a bit rougher on Joan Tallbois than—I need

have been. I'm beginning to see what she had to stand in this place—an' with that crew of crooks twisting the screw on her. Same as I've been getting it now, this past week. And I don't see the mob we've got in the house is much better. Harold!" she said, grasping his arm convulsively, "it's breaking me! It's more than I can stand for! Everybody's against me!"

Drummond dropped to his knees beside her, and suddenly caught her hands.

"Here is one who is not, Agnes," he said.

"Yes," she whispered. "You! You've always treated me white, Harold. You're different."

Their eyes met. Drummond felt his heart beating strongly.

"I will stand between you and them all. Only give me the right," he said passionately. "I love you, Agnes."

"You—love me?" she said slowly.

"I love you. You know what I am," he said a little hoarsely. "Will you marry me, Agnes?"

"Yes," she said, and the next moment she was in his arms.

"It was always you, Harold," she whispered, "first and now and always. From the day I saw you."

There was a long silence as he held her supple form to him and kissed her lips. Presently Agnes freed herself and stood back. She looked at him through half-closed eyes.

"Is this by Callaghan's orders?" she said.

There was a rasping sound in Drummond's throat.

His face flamed crimson, and faded to a dull white.

"Yes!" he said thickly.

Agnes gave a quiet nod.

"I'm not a fool, Harold. I was wise to it all from the word 'go.' Tell me, for I'm going to have it from your own lips. Didn't Callaghan set you on to get round me an' marry me so you could rob me for the good of him and his crew. Out with it."

"I've done with lies," said Drummond, though the words choked him. "He did. That is what I was to do."

"And though I made it easy, you thought it a heavy job, and reckoned to hate the sight of me."

He made no answer.

"And then," continued Lady Tallbois, "you begun to find that it weren't so bad, after all?"

"I began to find, and very quickly," said Drummond beneath his breath, "that in all the world you were the only woman that mattered to me. That I loved you, Agnes, cruel and passionate though you seemed, and every day you got those little hands of yours more tightly round my heart. And—well I love you, Agnes, and there it is."

"I know it," she said nodding. "You're speaking the truth now, Harold; you've near forgotten how to speak it this long while past. And I love you, too, an' I need you a heap worse than you need me. I loved you from the first. And then——?"

"Then I became bitter and kicked hard," muttered Drummond, "against Callaghan and his crowd. I refused the last time I saw him, and he put the screw on me, and life became more than I could stand."

Drummond had been staring before him stonily as he spoke. Suddenly he buried his face in his arm, and a gasping sob broke from him.

"I'm sick of it all!" he said hoarsely, writhing in his seat. "I'm sick of the life I've led with that beast Callaghan. Damn the day I ever met him! If you knew the things he's made me do—the things he's made me do! He got a grip of me once, and he's never let it go. I've done with him, whether he wins or loses—whatever the price is to me." He trembled violently. "And I'm afraid, Agnes—I'm afraid! Lord help me!"

Agnes threw herself down beside him, and laid a hand on his shoulder.

"You're just a kid, Harold," she said gently, "an' none such a bad kid. I guess there's a white streak in you. And black or white, I love you. You ain't the crook those other three are. You would have been, in time. You'd be what they are today. But that's cut out. Don't take on so, kid. The worst's over."

She put her arms about him and laid his head on her breast as if he were a child.

"Feeling better, Harold?" She sat up and took his wrists in her slim fingers; her wonderful eyes searched his face. "One last question? Suppose I wasn't Lady Tallbois of Knayth, but just a poor little cheap skate of a half-caste. Would you want me for your wife, then? Just get a cinch on that."

He glanced at her, faintly startled.

"What a question, Agnes! Do you doubt me?"

She gave a metallic laugh.

"Never mind, I've got the goods such as they are. Kiss me, Harold."

At that moment the door opened and the Señora De Castra Tallbois, who had completely effaced herself during the festivities, waddled into the room, clad in a pink dressing-gown. She halted and stared at the unexpected tableau before her. Drummond looked confused.

"Come right in, Mommer," said Agnes commandingly, "and be civil to your son-in-law. Harold and I are going to get married."

The Señora caught her breath, and changed colour. She came slowly up to Drummond.

"You!" she said, scanning his face. "You? A colleague of Callaghan—you, of all men?"

"I have done with that, Señora," muttered Drummond.

"He has done with that," echoed Agnes defiantly, "and I love him!"

"You love him. I know that well." The Señora drew a long breath. "Well, be it so." She eyed Drummond intently. "Agnes loves you. I think perhaps there may be a little good in you yet. And who are we," she added bitterly, "to judge you—my daughter and I?"

CHAPTER XXIX

THE GENTLEMAN FROM SALINAS

"AND you've sent it to the papers, Harold?" said Agnes, increasing a little pressure of her arm about Mr. Drummond's neck.

"It will appear," replied Drummond, "in the fashionable intelligence. 'A Marriage has been arranged between Mr. Harold Wemyss Drummond and Viscountess Tallbois of Knayth . . . ' with the usual apposite and inaccurate comments. But the most florid of Pressmen, Agnes, could not describe our happiness."

"When we're married—" said Agnes, and then to Drummond's amazement, she sprang up and with a swift movement flung open the French windows and stared out.

"What's the matter?" exclaimed Drummond, joining her.

"I heard a noise there," she said with extraordinary viciousness. "I believe there was somebody at that window!"

Drummond stepped on to the terrace and peered into the darkness. He could see nothing.

"For a while past," said Agnes, who looked curiously strung up and overwrought, "I've felt as if

there's somebody spyin' on me here—watchin'—watchin'—listenin'!"

"You fancied it," said Drummond, closing the windows.

"Maybe," muttered Agnes, "I'm full of fancies these days, Harold. I've a feelin' there's a curse on this place. It's hoodooed. I guess I won't want to live here after we're married."

Drummond had learned to know Agnes's moods and the volcanic outbursts of temper of which she was capable. He soothed her tactfully and soon the incident was forgotten. They sat together on the lounge by the fire, talking in low tones when the door opened abruptly, and Agnes's mother entered. Drummond showed some annoyance at the interruption. But as they looked up, both of them were startled at the usually placid woman's appearance. Agnes rose to her feet with an exclamation.

The Señora De Castra Tallbois was at no time a very attractive sight; at that moment she was less so than ever. She had just come in from the park wearing a silver-fox mantle flapping open loosely; her bonnet was askew and in her eyes a look of dreadful terror. She was trembling violently and her treble chin wabbled upon the collar of silver fox.

"*Madre de Dios!*" she said piteously, "have mercy on me."

"What's wrong?" said Agnes impatiently. "Have you seen a ghost?"

"I wish," gasped the Señora, "that that were all!"

She sank into a chair and placed a shaking hand over her heart.

"Agnes," she muttered, "I have always feared a day of reckoning, and it is here. I wish to speak to you alone."

Agnes stared at her with a sense of impending disaster.

"If there's trouble come to me," she said, "let Harold hear it, right here beside me. I intend he shall stay."

The Señora looked at her piteously and shivered.

"It is hard," she said under her breath, and still speaking in Spanish, "to say what I have to say—even to you. But to the Señor Drummond——"

"Let me go," said Drummond uneasily. He was wholly at a loss. "I will go. You can tell me, Agnes——"

"Stay!" said Agnes, and her hand closed on his wrist. "You got to stay. You hear me?"

"Very well, then," said the Señora dully. She glanced at Drummond with a gleam of hope. "It may be the Señor can help. But what use? It is all finished. You understand my tongue, sir? I cannot speak now in yours."

"Yes," said Drummond.

Suddenly the Señora's fat yellow fingers clutched the coverlet of the chair, and the words came from her with a rush.

"Agnes! I am neither wife nor widow of William Tallbois. You have no right to this great English fortune, nor to the title you are known by. And the time comes when they will take it from you."

There was a black silence. The woman shrank from her daughter's eyes. Then Agnes moved

away from Drummond's side and spoke quite quietly.

"I believe," she said slowly, "that you have told me the truth. It is the truth I am hearing at last. Go on. Let us have it all."

"*Mi carità*," moaned the woman, "it is hard. You can never forgive me. You can never——"

"Leave all that out," said Agnes wearily. "I tell you that I am past caring much for anything. Never mind forgiveness. Explain what you mean. And make it short."

Drummond's face looked as if it had suddenly been frozen. He glanced towards the door again, but seemed unable to move. Señora De Castra turned her head away and looked at neither of them. There was a brief silence, and she spoke again in a low, even voice.

"You know, Agnes, that when I was a girl at Santa Inez, twenty-three years ago, I became the wife of Pedro De Castra, the ranchero."

"I never heard," sneered Agnes bitterly, "that he had a profession."

"I," said the Señora dully, "was his profession. I kept the little store, and he took what money I could make, and he gambled and drank and fought. He lived on me and beat me; he was cruel as the black blood in his veins could make him. For more than a year I lived with him—a hopeless year."

"And then he had the consideration to die," said Agnes. "And left you his widow. Go on."

"Yes. He was killed in a brawl at the Pulqueria—the little inn down by the river. And they buried

him. I could not pretend sorrow. I began to live again. To stay in the place was impossible. I went to Salinas and I started a store there.

"And then," said the Señora slowly, "less than three weeks after Pedro, as I thought, was dead, and forgotten, came the young Englishman, who called himself Le Mesurier. And in ten days more—I had consented to be his wife."

"Ah," said Agnes quietly, "you loved him?"

"I do not know. I think the power of love had been killed in me; I became hard. I knew all there was to be known about men, and I determined that this young Englishman should be my husband. He was wholly different from Pedro. It was very easy. He was hardly more than a boy. I think I was the first woman he had much to do with. Men do not look at me now, but I was a very beautiful woman in those days—do not laugh at me, Agnes, for it is true.

"He was a boy, but a very wonderful boy, this young Ingles. I liked him. He came from—no one knew where. He had some money; where he got it I did not know—nor care. He had nearly seven hundred dollars.

"In ten days I, widow of Pedro De Castra, was the betrothed of this young Englishman, and I held him by the strings of my girdle. Florida was a paradise; we were to be idyllicly happy, living in a bower by the sea and growing oranges. Yes, he was a romantic boy in those days, my young Englishman. It was very soon after Pedro's death, but I did not care—neither of us cared. I wanted to forget Pedro.

"And then, three days before we were married, a

strange and terrible thing happened. A man broke into the little house where I lived in Salinas, by night, and robbed me of a little money I had, and went away . . . "

The Señora's voice became hoarse and her fingers opened and shut.

"It was Pedro!" she said thickly. "I knew that it was he. Pedro—my husband—risen from the dead. He, and no other!"

Agnes started to her feet.

"What?" she muttered. "How?"

"Listen!" said the Señora quickly. "When the fight happened at Santa Inez, Pedro knifed a man, and was himself wounded. There were many there, all mad with drink; the fight became general; the saloon was burned down, and four men lost their lives in the flames. There were four bodies"—she passed a hand over her eyes—"very much burned. I identified one of them as Pedro. So did others. We were all sure that it was he. And then—the inquest, the burial, and, as I believed, my freedom.

"Who it is that lies in the grave that bears Pedro's name I have never known. Many strangers and wastrels used the inn by the river; men that would never be missed.

"Pedro got away. He went into hiding—perhaps because of the thing he had done—and never showed himself openly, not even to me, when he came back in the night to rob me. But I knew it was he. He left a proof behind him. I knew that Pedro was alive!"

"Go on," said Agnes, drawing a deep breath. "What did you do?"

It was some moments before the Señora answered.

"I did—nothing!" she said in a whisper. "I tried to tell myself I was mistaken—though that was folly. I hoped that Pedro had gone for good. I hoped—a hundred things! I could not give up my young Englishman, and the life and the happiness promised me. I clung to it as the drowning cling to straws. Oh, I was mad, and wicked, and a fool. Some women can only be fools, at such times as that. I kept the secret. I said nothing to Le Mesurier. And in three days I entered the chapel with him, and left it as—his wife."

The Señora's voice faded till it was almost inaudible.

"For a month—six weeks—we lived at the grove—and I was—almost happy. He was good to me, this English boy—this wastrel of the Tallbois family, for such he was. In later years I've heard he became a human devil, and men say terrible things of him. But in those few weeks I saw nothing of it. Walter was kind to me. And always, even when angry, a hidalgo—a gentleman—to me. All this was before he lost his trust in women. He believed in me, you see."

"Go on," said Agnes; "much of this I know. What next?"

"The thing that any one but a foolish, half-crazed woman might have known was certain. Pedro came again. Not to claim his wife—no! But secretly, like a cur and thief, to gain profit by it all!" She shivered. "That is the man my—husband—was."

"Go on," said Agnes. "Your—Walter Le Mesurier—discovered it?"

"Very quickly. When his suspicions were aroused he tore the truth from me—he discovered all. And more—he learned that I had known it from the first—that I had known it before I married him. Oh, that awful time!"

She buried her face in her hands and sobbed, rocking to and fro.

"It was soon over. I think it turned the very heart of him to gall. From that hour I ceased to exist for him. He became like a man of ice. He said only one thing to me. 'Mercedes, go to your husband!' That was his word. He left me in the night, he passed out of my life, and from then to the day of his death I never saw him."

"I understand him very well," said Agnes softly, "and I understand you, too. Well—and what of De Castra? Your husband? The secret seems to have been well kept since."

"I escaped from Pedro, my one piece of good fortune. He paid me one more visit!" she shivered. "A dreadful visit that came near to kill me. When he had gone, I sold the grove immediately and gathered together what money I could—Walter had left all that he had with me when he went; he took nothing away with him—and I fled right away North across the States to Seattle. And you were born; and I lived in the North eighteen years. I was a fool not to go before.

"Pedro never found me. And after all these years I persuaded myself that he was dead. Nothing was ever heard of him, and a man of his habits was not likely to live long. And I hungered every year for

the South, and in the eighteenth year I went back to Florida—when you, much against my wishes, had gone on the stage, up there in the North.

"So sure was I that the past was dead that I used again the name of De Castra. Hateful though the name was it was the only name I had a right to. I could not endure to use Walter's name; I dared not do that. I let the people of Salinas think what they liked, and doubtless they wondered. But they did not know of Pedro's return.

"And then," said the Señora bitterly, "there came, at the last, that prince of rogues, Callaghan. Callaghan was a man who knew Walter Le Mesurier intimately; knew all about him, and that Le Mesurier and William Tallbois were one and the same. Callaghan traced the marriage of that young Englishman to me; the secret was in his hands, and he saw a way to enrich himself. He had collected all the proofs. He summoned me to England; I was to bring you with me, and establish the claim by his aid. I dared not refuse."

"Did Callaghan know about Pedro?" asked Agnes quickly.

"How can I tell," said her mother dully, "what Callaghan knows?"

Agnes walked slowly to the window and back again. She was strangely quiet. She did not even look at Drummond, who had seated himself on the arm of a chair, and was staring straight before him with a haggard face.

"There is one thing," said Agnes, "that I do not understand in the least. You have kept the secret

well—all these years. It seemed safe as the grave; it has even fooled the Bar and the House of Lords. Why do you tell it me now?"

The Señora rose.

"Because," she said, scarcely audible, "Pedro is in England. He is here. Not an hour ago I saw him, at the gates of the park. Though it is twenty years and more since he passed out of my life, I recognised Pedro. Do you think I could be mistaken. It is not hard to guess what he has come for!"

She grasped her daughter by the arm.

"To make our life a hell!" said the Señora. "To threaten, to bully, to wring hush-money from us, because a word from him would strip us of all we have. Pedro, my husband, I know you over-well!"

There was a faint, crackling noise at the window. It opened inwards, and a man stepped quietly into the room. He was small, lean, and swarthy, with crisp, grizzled hair, a leathery skin, and beady little eyes. They were wonderfully like the eyes of the wild pigs that root in the Southern forests.

For a moment no one spoke. The intruder's glance roved over the rich appointment of the room, then rested on the two women, and finally upon Drummond. Hat in hand, he smiled and bowed low, uttering a greeting in sibilant Spanish.

"Ladies," he said gently, "your most obedient, devoted servant."

Neither of the women answered him. Agnes had moved to her mother's side. Drummond stared at the intruder in blank dismay.

"How good of you," said the stranger, still smiling

fixedly, "to receive me in this splendid mansion. I, so shabby, so poor and obscure. Let me present myself: Don Diego Silvas, a humble gentleman of Florida—but I think you know me. If this Señor will be so amiable as to retire, there is a trifling message I have to deliver to you privately."

"The Señor Drummond," said the Señora unsteadily, "is my daughter's betrothed. He knows who you are. He knows all there is to know. I have told him—everything."

The man's yellow face twitched. He looked wholly disconcerted.

"So?" he said. "That seems to me indiscreet. However, the Señor, then, must be included in the little arrangement that is to come. I, a person of no importance——"

"Enough of that!" said the Señora huskily. "You are my husband, Pedro De Castra, whom I believed long since dead——"

"That I can well believe," interposed De Castra.

"And from whom I have never had anything but treachery, cruelty, and avarice. I was a happy woman till I met you. I have sinned, and paid a bitter price; it was deserved. You deserted me, allowed it to be believed that you were dead, and I owe you nothing.

"I know why you are here," she continued, her voice sinking still lower; "it is to trade upon and profit by my dishonour. That being the only certainty, say what you have to say quickly."

De Castra smiled.

"Always direct and straightforward, Mercedes.

How like you. Agreed, then. I am your husband. The gravestone at Santa Inez that bears my name, bears nothing but a lie. I can solve that riddle. I can prove my identity; and no one but I can do it."

He turned his eyes upon Agnes.

"And this adorable young Visconda is my daughter then; she has a right to my name, although she uses another. She is possibly free from blame. Blessed moment! What a flood of paternal emotion wells up in my heart. I admire your taste in diamonds, Agnes; I have never been able to afford any myself, but you adorn diamonds. However, to the point.

"Mercedes, I have only to open my lips, to carry this tale and the proofs of it to the proper quarter, and everything that you and your daughter hold will be stripped from you. You agree?"

"It is perfectly true," replied Señora De Castra.

"Good. Consider then, that this visit had never been made. I exist only in your imagination. The Señor Drummond also gains everything by so simple an arrangement. For this, of course, a price has to be paid."

"And I tell you, once and for always," said Mercedes, "that I will pay you nothing."

De Castra laughed, but his small eyes looked savagely at his wife.

"You waste time," he sneered; "you are trying to cheapen the bargain. You were never a fool about money. Perhaps you think I fear to make myself known on account of one or two little difficulties in my early career. Those no longer count. With such a prize in view I will face them willingly. Un-

less I get my terms in full, I go to the Englishman, Mottisfont. I have you," he concluded fiercely, "as tightly as a rabbit in a steel trap. Enough of this fooling; you will pay the price I dictate."

The Señora stepped nearer to him. Her face had faded to a lemon yellow. There was despair in her eyes, but there was resolution.

"Pedro," she said, "you know how to bully a woman. But this time you come too late. Do what you will, and let the truth be known. For I know what the end will be. I refuse. I refuse!"

De Castra stared at her, amazed. He saw that she meant precisely what she said. For the time he was entirely at a loss. An enormous gap lay between this clumsy rogue's handling of the situation, and the master-mind of Callaghan. Pedro had made a false step. The Señora's voice rose almost to a scream.

"Neither I, nor any one with me, will deal with you!" she said hysterically. "If they do, I will cry the truth from the house-tops! I—I——"

The Señora swayed, and sank into a chair. The next moment she had fainted. Before any one could speak, De Castra turned to Agnes.

"What say you?" he said quickly. "You at least are not an imbecile. Will you let a million slip through your fingers?"

Agnes looked him in the face. A tiny gleam shone in the eyes behind the drooping lashes. Drummond knew the sign; De Castra did not. She did not answer him in Spanish, and she spoke with remarkable quietness as yet.

"My mother has said her piece," she replied. "I

stand by her—she talked sense. Get me?" she added, with a sudden movement.

"You dare not let this fortune go!" cried Pedro.

"But I do," she replied. "Sooner than be bled white by a Florida horse-leech. I'll lose it anyhow at the finish. I've done."

De Castra grinned with rage and exasperation. His appeal seemed utterly wasted on the pair who stood staring at him rigidly. He could not understand it. And then Pedro played the card he should have led first.

"What of your lover?" he said savagely. "That moves you, does it? This young Drummond, to whom they say you are betrothed. You lose him too! Will he marry a pauper half-caste? Look at his face and see your answer. You little fool, unless you pay me——"

Drummond gave a stifled exclamation and stepped swiftly forward; in another moment Pedro would have found himself on his back. But the man whipped out a pistol.

"Keep your distance Señor," said Pedro. "Remain precisely where you are."

Drummond, white with anger, checked as the pistol covered him, and hesitated a moment. He was mentally measuring his chance, for he saw the man would fire. Before either could move, Agnes interposed with extreme effectiveness. The pent fires broke out.

With a wild cry she snatched a knife from the table and sprang at De Castra like a tigress.

"Agnes!" cried Drummond, flinging himself

between, and catching her just in time. "No—for Heaven's sake!"

De Castra sprang back hastily out of reach, and Drummond's intervention alone saved him. His swarthy cheeks lost their colour. Agnes struggled madly to free herself, but Drummond, appalled no less than Pedro by the fury of her attack, held her fast, and his strength was too much for her. De Castra backed away still farther, and lowered the useless pistol.

"This," he stammered, "is scarcely filial."

"Let me go!" screamed Agnes, writhing. "Lemme get at him!"

"Go, you fool!" exclaimed Drummond, "or I'll turn her loose!"

The words were hardly out of his mouth when De Castra turned and fled. It was not a dignified exit. He stumbled through the window and bolted headlong into the darkness.

Agnes ceased to struggle, and gasped faintly; at the moment when Drummond released her, a man sprang in through the window and looked round him swiftly; a tall, gaunt man, with fierce eyes. It was John Goodenough.

"Good lad!" he said to Drummond. "You were in time."

He glanced at Agnes and at the limp form of the Señora in the chair.

"Heaven pity you both," he said quietly. He turned again without a word, and stepping through the open window, vanished like a shadow into the night.

"Who on earth," gasped Agnes, staring blankly, "was that?"

Drummond's face was white as marble; the perspiration stood on his forehead, and he trembled slightly. He did not answer her question.

"See after your mother," he said hoarsely moving to the door. "I'm going to get out of this!"

CHAPTER XXX

EXIT LORD TALLBOIS

PHILIP MOTTISFONT paused on his way past his wife's door. She had been restless and troubled of late. Midnight was striking. Philip had been at work for many hours, but there was no rest for him yet. He passed down into the little study at the back, carrying some papers.

It was difficult to concentrate on them. For some time he sat at the desk, with hands pressed to his temples, vainly seeking a plan of action. The room was deathly cold. With a little shiver, Mottisfont rose and went into the sitting-room. The lights were switched off, and the fire had burned low.

"Good evening, Mottisfont," said a quiet voice.

Mottisfont started, and became aware of a dim figure reclining in the easy chair, and the faint glow of a cigar.

"Who is that?" he exclaimed sharply, and switched on the light. Two brooding eyes and a faint, ironic smile met Philip's stare.

"Goodenough!" he exclaimed, recognizing the ex-footman of Knayth. "What on earth——?"

"Forgive this informality, Mottisfont, but this will be my last appearance, and I have vital news that requires your attention," said the visitor. He

spoke not at all as a servant, but as an equal. "Is your wife asleep?"

Philip shut the door abruptly, and stood between it and the seated man.

"We will have an explanation," he said rather grimly. "I have been reflecting much upon you of late, Goodenough. There is a mystery about you which is going to be solved before you leave this room. In the first place, I am going to know exactly who you are!"

"It is that very information," said the visitor, "which I have come here to give you." He rose, and standing with his back to the fireplace, looked at Philip reflectively. "I will tell you what I would tell no one else living—honest man. I am Lord Tallbois of Knayth."

Philip's first conviction was that Goodenough had suddenly become insane. And yet, as he looked into the speaker's eyes, a dreadful tremor of doubt seized him. An errant thought, that had many times stolen into his mind during the past month, crystallized and took shape.

"I do not offer you proofs," said his companion quietly. "You are intelligent enough to recognize truth when you hear it. My birth-name is William Tallbois, later known to the police as Jim Carey. And as Sergeant Le Mesurier, of the Foreign Legion, I was believed to have fallen in France. Legally dead as I am, the Law does not hunt me, since it does not dream that I exist. Yet I stand before you in the flesh. I am Joan's father."

Philip's face went deadly white. He shrank back

a step, as one shrinks from a thing that is monstrous.

"I believe you," he said finally, his eyes fixed on the man's face. "Now I see the truth at last. And I have no choice but to believe you."

Lord Tallbois remained silent.

"And I've only this to say," added Philip hoarsely, "one can but wonder how Providence allows such men as you to defile the earth. It makes me sick to think I am here in the room with you; under the same roof as—my wife!"

For once Lord Tallbois flinched, as if he had been struck. He bowed his head.

"All that," he said very gently, "is perfectly true. I offer no defence, Mottisfont. If there is a hell beyond the grave it can be no worse than I have endured here. I have suffered to the uttermost frontiers of suffering. It is very just."

"You!" said Philip fiercely. "Who cares what *you* endure? Your daughter is the sacrifice. Joan's only fault is that she must own you for her father. You, who left her without even a name! You, who dishonoured her mother and threw the child adrift to bear the burden!"

There was a rasping sound in Tallbois' throat. He raised his head suddenly, and stood upright.

"No!" he said unsteadily, "not that, Mottisfont—not that! Black as my record is, I plead not guilty there. It was the cruelty of Fate—the devilry of circumstance. Joan, and Joan's mother—the only living beings I ever cared for!"

He passed a trembling hand across his forehead.

"I have listened to this from you," he said gently;

"any other man I would have killed. But you—I know your motive and respect it. Let us return to actualities. I have to tell you that, in a very short time, Joan will re-enter into her birthright as Lady Tallbois of Knayth—of which only an infernal injustice has deprived her. You are the man who will lead her into that kingdom."

Philip heard this in silence. The blood slowly left his face and surged back again.

"Lord Tallbois," he said, "is this true?"

"It is true. And I demand that you hear my story for events are moving swiftly to their conclusion, and you must act at once."

Philip seated himself, and leaning his arms on the table, scanned Tallbois' face intently.

"Go on," he said, "I will hear you."

"In order that you may understand," said Lord Tallbois, "I must first transport you, in the spirit, to a little settlement called Salinas, South Florida."

In a level, passionless voice, he gave Philip very much the same history as the Señora De Castra, a few hours earlier, had related to her daughter.

"And so," concluded Lord Tallbois, "finding that Mercedes De Castra was not, and never could be, my wife, and that she knew it well, I cut adrift from her immediately and absolutely. With much bitterness, I confess. Nor did I set eyes on her again."

"You left her?" said Philip.

"Yes," said Lord Tallbois. "I left her. It was finished."

Philip's brows knitted, and his eyes grew hard. "And your daughter also?" he said.

Lord Tallbois met his gaze squarely.

"Mottisfont," said Tallbois very quietly, "she is not my daughter. Agnes De Castra is—Agnes De Castra."

There was a long silence. At last the young K.C.'s searching eyes turned away from the older man's worn face.

"Go on, Lord Tallbois," he said gently. "What happened to you then?"

"*Facile descensus, Averni,*" said Tallbois, "the beginning of the descent into hell. With your permission I will obliterate my movements during the following few months. They do not matter, remarking only that I was sorry for the woman, and am sorry for her now; her lot was a hard one. But there are things one cannot do.

"I was not, perhaps, wholly black in those days. After some months I felt a certain compunction; I even went back to Salinas to see if anything could be done for her. I had left with her what little money and property I had—she was welcome to those. But she had gone—passed out—vanished entirely. She and that yellow jackal who was, in fact and in law, her husband.

"I was hardly more than a boy then," said Lord Tallbois reflectively, "and I thought that I had done with women for ever, that I would never trust one again. The young are apt to think such things. In less than a year I met Helen Lloyd in Georgia. There was never such a woman in this world before, as Helen Lloyd. I fell in love with her. And I married her."

A strange light played in the sombre eyes.

"I married her—with this previous folly still hanging over my head. I do not know quite what I deserve for that. But, after all, Mercedes De Castra was not my wife. I kept that secret, and I thought that if ever trouble should come I could prove it easily. Or perhaps I did not think at all. Who can guess all the amazing things that Fate may have in store for him?

"I had left my name and my identity in the sea when the ship that brought me out went down. But I revived it. I could give Helen no other name than the name which was mine by right. And in that little forgotten town of Georgia I married her as William Travers Tallbois. And I knew just one year of perfect happiness and peace.

"I still believe that if Helen had lived I should never have been—what I afterwards became. She was the first good influence that entered my life. But in a year she was taken from me, leaving an infant daughter—Joan.

"The light went out of my life. It seemed that I hated all mankind. I went North—and fell into the Pit. Let me offer no excuses. I will touch lightly on this, for you know most of it already.

"The child was put into the charge of an excellent, honest woman—Janet Mackellar. By and by there came into my heart a longing to see little Joan. But things had happened in the meantime that made it impossible for me to make myself known. I was an outlaw. Joan, as you have learned already, did not

know me as her father. Even in those days I could not claim my own child.

"Janet Mackellar hated me. She hated even my rare visits to Joan. Her instinct was perfectly sound. She would not use the money I used to send for the child's support. Finally she fled, taking Joan with her. And so I lost Joan.

"I pass over my own intermediate career—the less said about it the better—and come to the War and my enlistment in the Foreign Legion. One day my section was wiped out by a shell. I was wounded and taken prisoner.

"I gave the Boches not my own name, but the name of one of my comrades who had been blown to rags, and so had no further use for it. Why? Because it is my first instinct to cover my identity and conceal my traces wherever I go, for I was one of the hunted of the earth. The Boches sent me, with other prisoners, to East Prussia. Later, I escaped into Russia, and eventually reached England.

"That little camouflage of mine was helped out by luck. The Legion had buried what there was left of my brother sergeant, under my name. He was reported missing, and I, Sergeant Le Mesurier, was posted as killed. Nothing surprising in that, Philip. Such things happened a hundred times over in the War. These little errors do creep in when thousands of men are being spread over the ground by high explosives.

"So I arrived in England—nameless and legally dead, to find myself actually Lord Tallbois of Knayth and a gift for the hangman (I confess it!) if I were so

ill-advised as to come to life. An ironic situation, Mottisfont. But very little I cared, for I had made a greater discovery yet; I found Joan!

"Also," he added, with peculiar bitterness, "I found an old associate of evil days—Callaghan. There is no blacker beast living. Callaghan knows all there is to be known about me, and thinking me dead, he was before me with Joan. He had the proofs; he was about to exploit and rob my daughter. A little surprise for Callaghan to find me back from the grave. Behold, a deadlock. Either of us could have sent the other to the last penalty of the Law. Neither could do so without betraying himself. I, being legally dead, held the stronger hand.

"It was I who rent away the proofs from him, and sent them to you. Joan came into her own. But Callaghan had a higher card to play. For once he knew more than I. He held Mercedes De Castra and her daughter in reserve. I did not know she was alive—nor even that Agnes De Castra existed. It was a master-stroke.

"Then came disaster. I had barely the hope of ever being able to find proof of Pedro De Castra's survival. That one thing was the key to the whole riddle. There seemed no chance of unearthing it.

"I confess I was in despair. There seemed nothing left to do but to make my settlement with Callaghan; to blot him out and then throw in my hand. But I still held a few threads; I had resources, and these I followed up. I went to Liverpool, intending to sail for Florida on that quest.

"At Liverpool the quest ended, and I did not leave

English soil. For, by an amazing trick of Fate, I found the very thing I sought. Not the twenty-year-old story of De Castra and his vanished identity —but De Castra himself—newly landed from a Western Ocean liner. He did not know me. I omit details, but my own suspicions were quickly aroused; I have verified them fully since he has been in England. The man is no other than Pedro, the señora's husband."

Lord Tallbois lifted a warning hand.

"Now this yellow cur was here, of course, for but one thing. To blackmail the so-called Viscountess Tallbois and her mother. I had to make certain, and I have watched developments with extreme care. The result has been what I expected. Tonight, not many hours ago, he presented himself at Knayth, and attempted to make terms with the De Castra women. He is a clumsy dog, and it seems the attempt failed. Doubtless the girl and her mother saw what the end would be if they gave in to him. Whatever their motive, they refused—let that be accounted to them for grace.

"Mottisfont," concluded Lord Tallbois quietly, "you hold De Castra in the hollow of your hand." He passed a folded paper to Philip. "Here is his description, the name he goes by, and most vital of all, the means of proving his identity. One of two things he will certainly do. Either fasten himself to the De Castras, in which case you need only have him intercepted. Or, which is more likely, he will come and try to bleed you heavily, since he believes that he holds all the cards. So, indeed, he does. But I

have placed the master-card in your hands, and you can lay bare the facts at one stroke when you get hold of him. It is so easy that I need say no more to a man of your capacity. That is your task, and I leave it to you with confidence. Joan is Lady Tallbois of Knayth."

Philip rose to his feet. His face was very white.

"You have made it clear enough," he said. "It is wonderful—and, also, it is terrible. But I do not follow the last thing you said. Joan is not Lady Tallbois. For her, such a position would be a living lie. I will never consent that she should claim it; I cannot bolster up this fiction that you are dead; nor will I ever benefit by it."

Lord Tallbois smiled grimly.

"Within twenty-four hours," he said, "that difficulty will no longer exist."

Philip stared at him and gave a little shiver.

"I do not ask what you mean," he said. "I do not understand you. You are keeping something back from me."

Tallbois' smile became grimmer still.

"I do not understand myself," he replied quietly. "The Tallbois differ in their basic influences. It is strange that I should be Joan's father, is it not? For she is that supreme work of God, a good woman. I have only known one other. Joan is incapable of anything base. Whereas I—" he shrugged his shoulders faintly—"am the most unutterable blackguard that ever went adrift as a scourge on Society. I have examined myself impartially, Mottisfont, to find I have not a single redeeming quality."

"I agree with your first point," said Philip. "Of the second, I feel a doubt. And," he added, flushing a little, "I offer you a qualified apology for what I said when you arrived. I went too far."

Lord Tallbois shook his head.

"By no means too far. But you have the generosity and the sentiment of youth, Philip; I thank you for that word. You have been tried in the fire and you are metal of proof, a worthy mate for Joan. I, who am past forgiveness, humbly thank God that she has such a husband."

He straightened himself and looked Philip in the face.

"And now let us get to work," he said. "You see your way?"

"No!" said Philip quickly, "for there is one vital obstacle. What of this infamous devil, Callaghan? He and his associates. We have lost sight of that. Whatever the cost to any of us, justice must be done."

"Justice will be done," said Lord Tallbois softly. "It is in my hands. To-morrow Callaghan proposes to leave England. I will do him the credit to say that all Scotland Yard would not stop him. But first he has to settle with me. I shall deal with Callaghan. That is my task—as yours is to ensure Joan's rights for her."

He came a little nearer.

"Callaghan's career is ended, Mottisfont. What the police have failed in, I shall humbly achieve. It is quite useless for you or any man to intervene. Callaghan's fate—and mine—are very near. It is

better so—better for Joan, and for you. I go now," he said, taking his hat from the table, "to my task."

He paused, and looked at Philip strangely.

"This, Mottisfont, is my final exit. Neither she nor you will be troubled with me again. To that I pledge my word. But one thing remains before I leave you. I must see Joan. I must take my leave of her."

Mottisfont groaned. The perspiration stood upon his forehead as he looked at the speaker.

"Tallbois," he said hoarsely, "you ask what is impossible. Do you believe, for a moment, I will expose her to the shock—to the knowledge——"

"To neither," replied Lord Tallbois quietly. "Never in this world shall Joan know that the shadow in her life, the lost soul that strove to shield her, was, indeed, her father. Tell me—is she asleep?"

"Yes."

"Let me see her; you need not be afraid. It is a dead man who asks you."

Philip found a difficulty in speaking.

"God help you, Tallbois," he said hoarsely. "It is not for me to refuse you."

He led the way upstairs, and very gently opening Joan's door, looked within. He made a sign to Tallbois.

The man came forward, entered the room silently, and stood motionless.

There was a faint light from a gas-mantle, turned low. Joan's head lay on the pillow, fair and delicate as a flower; a stray wisp of hair drifted across her

cheek. Her hand hung down over the coverlet. She smiled faintly in her sleep.

With bowed head, Lord Tallbois looked at her. He moved forward noiselessly as a shadow, and dropping on one knee, touched reverently with his lips the pendant hand.

He came down again into the hall. Philip closed Joan's door. Lord Tallbois did not offer his hand, but made him a little bow of farewell.

"*Moriturus te salutat*," he said.

There came a sharp, authoritative knock at the front door. It jarred on Philip's nerves and made him start. Lord Tallbois flitted from his side as noiselessly as a shadow and passed into the darkened study.

CHAPTER XXXI

TRAPPED

FOR a moment Philip stood hesitating. The knock was repeated. With a curious sense of foreboding, he moved to the front door and opened it. Commissioner Mervyn from Scotland Yard was standing on the step, and behind him a burly looking man in tweeds, whom Philip did not know.

"I must see you at once, Mottisfont, on a most urgent matter," said Mervyn, passing into the hall without waiting for an invitation. "This is Inspector Brancepeth, from the Yard."

"Come in," said Philip, and he led the way into the sitting-room, the two men following.

"Are you alone?" asked Mervyn.

"My wife is upstairs," replied Philip. "Wait a moment and I will be with you."

Greatly perturbed, he left the room and slipped into the study.

"Tallbois!" he whispered. "Tallbois!"

No answer. Philip turned on the light. There were heavy window-curtains, and a cupboard-door standing open, but no Lord Tallbois. It was a ground-floor room, with a small garden behind; the window was closed. Philip gave a sigh of relief. The next moment he found Mervyn at his elbow.

"I asked you if you were alone, Mottisfont," he said again.

"Certainly I am alone!" said Philip sharply, "except for the unexpected pleasure of your company, and that of the policeman. What then?"

"All right, my dear fellow," said Mervyn soothingly. "I only wanted an answer. I apologize. Brancepeth!"

The inspector came in.

"Wait here, Brancepeth, will you? Now, Mottisfont, if you'll come into the other room, I am at your service."

"What the devil is this about?" said Philip, with a touch of anger, as the sitting-room door closed on them both.

Mervyn seated himself and hesitated. He was looking unusually grave.

"Mottisfont, information of an extraordinary character has been sent to the Yard. Its source is suspect, it may well be false; yet we have no choice but to act upon it."

"Go on, Mervyn," said Philip coolly, though his heart was beating fast. "What is it?"

"Briefly this. That William Tallbois—your wife's father—long believed dead and whose record we know only too well, is actually alive and in London!"

Mottisfont said nothing.

"It is so incredible as to sound like a fairy tale," said Mervyn, "but all things are possible, and we have evidence in our hands which lends colour to it. I will tell you at once that I myself believe it."

"Well," said Philip quietly, for the other had paused. "What then?"

"Why this," said Mervyn slowly, "and remember that I am speaking now unofficially—if it is true, it is a thousand pities! A man who was as dead as William Tallbois was believed and proved to be these two years—should stay dead! It is a positive indecency for him to come to life. Tallbois and the man known to the American police as Slim Jim Carey were one and the same. His record is enough to burn the pages of the police books it is written in. That record ended years since. He is supposed to lie dead in France. His resuscitation can only bring death to himself—and shame and distress to many innocent people."

"I am with you there," said Philip grimly.

"Yet," said Mervyn sternly, "there is no choice in the matter. If my information is true this malefactor must be caught, brought to book, and made to face the penalty he has so long escaped."

"Let me put one question, Mervyn. You are clever fellows, you C.I.D. chiefs; I am the first to own it. But—could you catch, let us say, the flame of a candle after it had been blown out?"

Mervyn smiled.

"No," he said, "we could not do that."

"In my opinion," said Philip, "you are equally incapable of catching the alleged Jim Carey. He has beaten the police of the world for thirty years. He would beat you. Even assuming that he is alive."

"Mottisfont," said Mervyn, "I put it to you

straight! I have come to you because it is useless to go to Lady Tallbois or her crowd. But I have cause now to believe you, Philip Mottisfont, K.C., know more about this than you choose to say. You are skating on very thin ice, Mottisfont. I am close on the scent. And I come to you because you are an honest man."

He leaned forward and peered into Philip's face.

"Do—you—know—anything—of William Tallbois?"

There was a long pause.

"Mervyn," said Philip deliberately, "I shall tell you the precise truth, for no other course is possible. And I have far bigger news for you than you have brought to me. Listen."

He told Mervyn, briefly and clearly, all that Lord Tallbois had told him, keeping back only the date of his visit. And he handed Mervyn the paper that Tallbois had given him. The commissioner listened to the end, and his face was a study. At last he sprang from his chair as if propelled by springs.

"Mottisfont! This is stupendous!" he cried. "And there is no falsehood here—I see bed-rock truth in it at last! To think that it should come to us through—Jim Carey!"

"The truth had to come out," said Philip. "It may seem I have betrayed his confidence. But I think not; I was convinced you would not find him."

Mervyn grasped Philip by the shoulder.

"Mottisfont," he said, "I am thinking far less of finding Tallbois—no, we will not call him that; Jim Carey, I mean—than of getting hold of Pedro De

Castra. He comes first! Here is the chance of righting a terrible wrong—of doing justice at last." His face lit up. "We will have this slippery customer —this ineffable Silvas from Florida, who holds the key to the situation—and pin him. And a ticklish job it's going to be; one slip will bungle it! For the honour of the police it must be done."

"For Joan's sake it must be done," said Philip, "but it is your job, Mervyn. Not even for Joan can I soil my hands with the beast."

"A beast he is," agreed Mervyn. "Beside him, the other is at least a man. Upon my life one can't help admiring him. I could almost shake hands with him for sheer admiration for the amazing fellow—I mean the unmitigated scoundrel—who has steered this problem to a finish. Leave him aside; we deal now with De Castra."

"I see one big difficulty—" began Philip.

"Sure!" interrupted Mervyn, "for if the creature were to hold out and deny his own identity, it would cause endless difficulty and bother. Also, there is the chance he might give us the slip altogether. As he has failed with the De Castras, however, his next move——"

There was a faint single rap at the front door knocker. The two men looked at each other quickly.

"Rather curious," suggested Philip gently. "What visitor would one expect at this hour of the night?"

"It would not surprise me in the least," said Mervyn under his breath, "if that's the man himself.

These gentry never waste time when they're on a dangerous job." His eyes flashed. "If so, we've got him! Bring him into that back study of yours, Mottisfont."

Mervyn slipped noiselessly out of the room. For a few moments Philip stood with knitted brows, thinking. Passing through the hall he glanced at the study, and saw it was in darkness. He opened the front door and encountered a dark, wizened person, with remarkably small eyes.

"Who are you?" said Mottisfont curtly, "and what do you want?"

"What I want-a? A word with the Señor," the visitor replied with an ingratiating wriggle, "which will be ver' much to his advantage. My news," he added, "comes from Florida. The Señor speak Spanish?"

"No."

"It make no matter. I spik-a the English pretty well. I can make myself understood. Shall we talk alone, Señor?"

Mottisfont let the man in, and taking him to the study, turned the light on. Pedro De Castra looked round him furtively, closed the door and bowed to Philip with a leer and a smirk.

"I wish-a to congratulate the Señor Mottisfont," he whispered, "and his so adorable wife!"

It is probable that Pedro De Castra did not realize how near he was at that moment to having his head bumped crudely against the wall. The man inspired Philip with such repulsion that he could scarcely bring himself to speak.

"State your business briefly," he said. "What is your name?"

"Don Diego Silvas, a humble gentleman of Florida."

"Your real name, I mean?"

"The Señor is-a please to be facetious," smiled De Castra. "I am what I have said. I am like the Señor, an honest man. I like-a to do right. But I cannot afford to do right for nothing. There, you see, I am all-same as a lawyer."

He paused to observe the effect of his words. But there was nothing to be learned from Philip's face.

"There is an English lady," said De Castra, "who did have a title and a great wealth. Oh, a ver' great deal of money." He licked his lips and wriggled. "And she have them taken away from her. Señor, they were taken away wrong! She would still be the Lady Tallbois of Knayth. Ah! I astonish the Señor, is it not?"

He shifted his chair a little closer, and breathed hard.

"But there is only one man in the world-a, that can prove it. And, without this man, nothing can he do himself. Señor, what if I find you this man?"

He leaned forward impressively.

"Señor," he said, "if I can prove that your wife, the Señora Mottisfont, is of right Lady Tallbois, tell me, is not that worth a price?"

"Yes," said Philip, "it is."

"*Bueno*, of course, it is! And I can do it. I will prove to you that I speak-a truth, and then I shall want ten thousand pounds English. After that——"

"Ah, modest as well as honest," interrupted Philip. "Your faith in human nature puts me, a cynical K.C., to shame."

"Ah, you do not believe me!" said Pedro eagerly, and a trifle anxiously. "See, I will tell you a little secret that will-a convince you. It is a safe secret, for without my proofs you can never do at all. There is at Knayth a girl who is call the Lady Tallbois, and her mother, the Señora." He tapped the table with his dusky finger-nails. "The girl is no more the Lady Tallbois than I am. For her mother's marriage with the Englishman, Tallbois, was no marriage at all! The woman she have a husband living when she marry Tallbois, and the girl is nothing at all! And if I get money enough I can prove it in one day!"

Philip felt his flesh crawl as he looked at the man.

"The woman had a husband living—and he is alive now!" said De Castra huskily. "I can turn her and the girl out. Señor, what will you give me if I make that your wife is the Lady Tallbois? What price, that I give her her rights?"

"You yellow mongrel," said Philip quietly, "if you take my wife's name on your lips again, I will clean the floor of this room with your body, and then tread on you. Can you understand that?"

De Castra cringed and turned a slightly paler shade of yellow. He waved two hands apologetically and shrugged his shoulders.

"As the Señor pleases. And yet," he added with a snakish wriggle, "it is a pity to threaten. Listen, then, Señor. Say that the first, the real, husband of

the Señora Mercedes is alive. Say that I know him, and can find him. Will you give me now——"

"Enough of this childish lying!" said Philip suddenly. "You are Pedro De Castra. You have already been to your wife and daughter and have attempted to blackmail them; your attempt has failed, and therefore you come to me. It is quite comprehensible that the so-called Lady Tallbois has lately found her position so dangerous that she would rather lose it than be bled by such a cur as you. She is to be congratulated on her good sense. Or it may even be that there is a gleam of honesty in her—or in her mother. For the girl at least has courage."

Pedro huddled in his chair, and glared sullenly at Philip.

"All this may be true," he sneered, "yet no one can prove the truth or prove my identity, but me only! It cannot be done in spite of me. You know that, too!"

He got up, and leaned his hands on the table.

"Will you deal with me," he said, "if I tell you—here to your face, that I am De Castra!"

"If you tell me that," said Philip drily, "I will—deal with you."

"Ver' good," said the Floridian savagely. "Then I will tell you! You think you can play with me. You mean two things, but I mean only one thing! I am Pedro De Castra of Santa Inez, husband of the woman who calls herself Mercedes Tallbois!"

He grinned malevolently at Philip.

"I tell-a you the truth. But if I choose to deny it—to keep back the proofs and say it was a lie—not you nor a hundred lawyers can show who I am."

"Not another word," said Mervyn, thrusting back the cupboard door with his knee, and stepping out, "is necessary. It would be a pity to overdo it."

Brancepeth, at the same moment, parted the window-curtain and emerged.

With a squeal of amazement and rage, De Castra sprang back and his hand whipped behind his coat. The burly Brancepeth had him pinioned like a flash. There was a twist and a yell. A knife fell on the carpet.

"Decorate the gentleman, Brancepeth," said Mervyn serenely. Before the words were out of his mouth there was a double click and a pair of handcuffs fastened themselves on De Castra's wrists.

"What for you do this? You have no right!" he screamed. "I have-a done nothing!"

"No; not even Mr. Mottisfont," said Mervyn. "It would take a much sharper rogue than you, De Castra, to blackmail our star K.C. But one or two little things in Florida, I fancy, stand to your credit."

"They do not count!" said Pedro, and he glared venomously at Philip. "You gain nothing by this, you! I tell you now, that all I said was a lie!"

"Then I fear, Mr. De Castra, that you have attempted to obtain money by false pretences!" said Mervyn winningly.

"I tell you——"

"Take him away, Brancepeth," concluded Mervyn, and De Castra was led out, whimpering and whining. As soon as he was gone Philip flung up the window as wide as it would go.

"Phew!" he muttered. "Let us go somewhere where it's clean. Come in the other room, Mervyn!"

They made for the front room.

"We have got our man, and we have got his admission, which saves much trouble," said Mervyn. "The rest is easy. There is enough to hold him on, and even if the United States police do not want him, that doesn't matter. While he is in custody, this paper"—he held up the note that Philip had given him twenty minutes before—"will enable us to identify him legally and trace him right back to his beginnings."

"I foresee no difficulty whatever," said Philip. "This last stroke clears the way."

Mervyn held out his hand.

"I congratulate you, Mottisfont, from the bottom of my heart. If any one ever deserved to come into their rights it is your wife—and you. And now," he said quietly, "I must go, for I have a harder duty to perform—a bigger quarry to bring down than this half-bred jackal."

"I would remind you," said Philip, who looked troubled, "that Callaghan——"

"When I have found William Tallbois I shall have found Callaghan," said Mervyn quietly; "the two hang together. I know rather more than I have chosen to tell you, Mottisfont. I even know that Tallbois has been with you this very day, and though he has given me the slip for the moment, I shall find him; and I must do so."

He sighed.

"It is a pity," he concluded, "as I said before—for

your wife's sake. But we cannot juggle with justice in this country. I must do my duty."

"And if you fail—what then?"

"Ah, then," replied Mervyn, "it is another matter. But I cannot hold out much hope to you that I shall fail. I have done all I can for you. Good night, Mottisfont!"

CHAPTER XXXII

THE HUT ON THE MARSHES

A DAMP wind blew from the distant river, bearing before it the brackish, heavy smell peculiar to the Lower Thames. The rushes in the dykes whispered hoarsely, and it was very dark. So dark that the outlines of an old hut on Plumstead Marshes were no more than a blur in the encircling gloom.

It would have needed an eye thoroughly focussed to the darkness to distinguish among the stunted thorn bushes close to the hut three still dimmer figures. But they were there, and from one of them proceeded a voice.

"Drummond," it said, "has not arrived."

"There is no sign of him, Chief," replied gloomily the voice of Vaille. "And I doubt if he will come."

The only acknowledgment from the third and bulkiest of the three figures was a sigh and a long shiver. Mr. Theophilus Bell was feeling chilly both in body and in spirit.

"How long are we to wait?" said Vaille impatiently.

"Not one second," answered Callaghan coolly; "we are not waiting for Drummond, but for the tide. It will turn in forty minutes, and that forty minutes, gentlemen, will be our last on English soil."

"If you can call these unchristian marshes soil at all," commented Bell, his teeth chattering.

"I have certainly known more hilarious spots than this," agreed Callaghan, "but you will agree it is preferable to the cells at Bow Street. But for me, that would be your lodging.

"Gentlemen," continued Callaghan moodily, "I confess defeat, but not entire failure. We were playing for great stakes, and I long ago foresaw that a flight from Egypt might become necessary when the prize was realized. It has eluded us, yet we do not go quite empty-handed. There is the ten thousand from Joan Mottisfont, and a lesser dividend from her successor. It is nothing at all to what I hoped to gain.

"I underrated Mottisfont. Aided largely by luck, he was able to set the law on our trail in a way no man has yet done, and complete disaster threatened. And I own frankly that, now the game is ended, I fear Jim Carey more than I fear Scotland Yard. He has now nothing to lose.

"As for the police, I have kept you and myself in very efficient hiding since the danger became acute. Tonight I have brought you here that we may follow the line of retreat I have always held in reserve. I take no man into my confidence till it is necessary, but the arrangements are complete, and I will give you the route.

"Yonder in the river, below the lime-kiln wharf, lies the coasting brigantine *Mine and Thine*, of Rochester —a name of happy augury. She and her personnel are under my direction. That old ship is safer for

our purpose than any steam vessel. For her comings and goings are obscure and of interest to nobody. No thief-hunter would suspect her. By daybreak we shall be abreast the Maplins, and noon will find us off the Galloper Light. Eventually we shall vanish as completely as the *Mine and Thine* herself. And as to our movements beyond that point I will enlighten you later. Our safety, my friends, is assured."

"Good enough," said Vaille, "simple and effective. Why not go abroad at once, Chief?"

"We cannot sail till the ebb begins, for the wind is against us. To eliminate the smallest risk, I do not propose to board and wait on an anchored ship, but to join her as she is on the point of starting. The boat will come to the stage for us at ten-thirty."

"But Drummond——"

"Drummond," said Callaghan harshly, "has certainly had my message bidding him attend this rendezvous, and if he is such a fool as to ensure his own destruction by staying behind, let him. His hopes of Knayth are at an end. It is true that Scotland Yard has no evidence connecting him with us, and apparently they are not after him. But that is a slender reed to rely on."

"Although Callaghan stock is somewhat flat on the market just now," said Vaille, "I have always found it safest in the long run, Chief, to do as you suggest. And doubtless Drummond will find the same. There is still time——"

He broke off suddenly. His quick ear caught a rustle farther up the hedge.

The three men crouched, scarcely breathing. Callaghan's hand stole quietly to his hip pocket. Someone was certainly approaching. A vague form became visible, it halted, and a strained voice whispered.

"Callaghan. Is that you?"

"Ah, my young friend," said the Chief blandly, "I perceive you are not quite yourself, or you would not utter improper names in that reckless fashion. Welcome. I began to think you were not coming."

"I wish I had not come!" said Drummond's voice thickly. "I wish I had stayed and taken my chance. It would be no worse than returning to you cursed thieves! I think I shall go back!"

"Your place with us is waiting for you," said Callaghan calmly. "And, as we have still half an hour, and our distinguished company is now complete, we'll go into the rendezvous and so avoid any chance callers. This way."

He unlatched and opened the door of the old hut, groped his way inside, and the others followed him.

"Sit on the floor," said Callaghan, "it is strewn with dry rushes, and is better than the marshy turf outside. We have a little settlement to make, for which this is just the place. Pull that door to, Bell."

"Can't we have a light?" shivered Bell. "It's safe enough in here."

"By no means. Too many chinks in the woodwork. Don't be a fool, Bell. And now, Drummond, what did you mean by what you said a moment ago?" Callaghan's voice was dangerously silky.

"Have you encountered any undesirable person on your way here?"

"No!" replied Drummond bitterly, "and I mean just what I said! The thought of going abroad with you, Callaghan, attracts me little more than Dartmoor Prison does. You dress your blackguardism in purple and fine linen, but I'm sick of blackguardism, and I'm sick of you! Do you hear, you beast?" His voice came hysterically from the darkness of the hut. "I don't want your loot. I'll have no further hand in robbing women. I—I don't know why I came here!" he ended with a sob.

"You came," answered Callaghan, quite unruffled, "because you dared not stay away. The game is up; it is quite certain that the unspeakable Jim Carey will give you away with the rest of us, if he has not done it already, and you are the easiest to lay hands on. Neither England, home, nor beauty have any further use for you; and in spite of all these vapourings, you have not the courage to face the criminal dock, and would be a fool if you did. I am saving you from Carey in spite of yourself, so be good enough to stop drivelling and attend to business."

"I would sooner be at Carey's mercy than yours, I think," muttered Drummond. "I want to be done with it all!"

"You will think better of that when you are on salt water and under my genial influence," replied Callaghan with the same deadly placidity. "This yearning after a new life, and all the rest of the nonsense, arrives rather late. It is out of your reach. I attribute it to the influence of the

delightful Agnes—the very last source I should have ever suspected such an idea to arise from." He chuckled faintly. "Well, which of us will ever understand women? I have felt you growing shaky for some time, Drummond, and I have not the least intention of leaving you behind, for you are the only person who might have the power to trace me after I am gone.

"Enough!" he added with a sudden viciousness. "You will sail with us. I wish to hear no more from you. Vaille, Bell, I address myself to you both. It is hard to leave the field of our activities like this; to feel that we have been only partially successful. Yet though I may be thousands of miles away, cut off from all direction and influence, and even from all profits, still the women of the house of Tallbois may find that they have not done with me. Though another hunter may profit by the kill, the deer was of my starting," he added bitterly, "and I shall be glad to know it has been pulled down.

"As for Slim Jim Carey, though he may have spoiled the hunting, we leave him to pay the price. Before us lies freedom, but I have caused all the facts about him to be delivered into the hands of the authorities, and they dare not fail to act upon it. It should also mean the breaking of Mottisfont," said Callaghan savagely, "for he has certainly had dealings with Carey, and the two will fall together. Gentlemen, the account is paid in full."

"And the receipt," said a voice serenely, "is ready, and awaits stamping."

A terrified gasp came from Vaille, and Callaghan

started violently. A sudden ray of light dazzled them, sprouting from a little electric case-lamp that hung from a hook on the wall.

It lit up the hut, illuminating the four figures that sprawled on the rush-strewn floor. In the corner, close to the lamp, a long, lean man with brooding eyes was sitting on a bench, one knee crossed easily over the other; on his lips played a faintly mocking smile. Beside him was a small black case. One slim hand rested nonchalantly on this, the two first fingers touching a metal terminal.

In a moment Callaghan's pistol was out. Lord Tallbois laughed.

"I have been so interested, Callaghan, in your address to the faithful," he said, "that I was reluctant to interrupt you. Shoot, Callaghan; press the trigger by all means. It is simplest for us all, and it will not affect the result. A bullet cannot prevent it, but will rather hasten the slight pressure of my finger, which is all that we require."

Callaghan was on the point of firing, but for the moment his eye strayed to the black box, and instantly the meaning of it flashed into his brain. He turned paler, but still kept the pistol aligned at Tallbois' breast.

"You are acquainted with the properties of fulminate of mercury?" said Lord Tallbois almost amiably. "You appreciate, I see, this little toy I have brought with me. When it detonates there will be nothing humanly recognizable left on the site of this hut—an added advantage. Shall I press the button now, or will you hear what I have to say?"

Bell was crouching and whimpering; Drummond sat rigid. From Vaille came a frenzied outburst.

"Fire, Callaghan!" he cried thickly. "Fire, I tell you, and take the chance. It's the only way. He's playing with us—there's death in his eyes!"

"Well done, Vaille," said Tallbois, quietly, "you were never a coward. Your perceptions are sound, though your delivery a little too dramatic to please the fastidious. Your 'Chief,' you see, is still trying to make up his mind. Callaghan, do you wish to hear my ultimatum?"

Swift resolve flashed into Callaghan's eyes—again he seemed about to fire; but he hesitated, and the pistol wavered. Suddenly he lowered it.

"Your ultimatum!" he said hoarsely. "What do you mean by that? You're not bluffing—you can blow us all to the devil if you wish, I suppose? Take your hand off that cursed thing and let us talk. What is it you want?"

"A settlement," replied Lord Tallbois. His hand remained on the box.

"What settlement?" said Callaghan eagerly, watching the speaker's hand. "Do you," he said, licking his dry lips, "want a share in the loot? Or a passage out—to safety?"

There was a gleam of ineffable contempt in Tallbois' eyes.

"A passage out," he answered, "for us all. But a longer journey, Callaghan, than you have in mind. It is clear to me that you and your partners have cumbered the ground too long. You may have beaten the police; you have not beaten me. It is

not well that you should continue in the flesh to rob, and plan, and torture the innocent.

"I include myself," he added quietly, "in this verdict. There is no place for me in the world of men. Legally dead, it is better that I should be dead in fact. A hundred times better for the one living creature whose welfare I have at heart, and against whom you have offended beyond all hope of appeal. With open eyes you transgressed my warning."

Callaghan made no answer. There was a little whimpering sigh from Bell.

"I perceive that you recognize this fully, Callaghan," continued Lord Tallbois, pitilessly. "You are under no illusions. Yet at this moment your ingenious brain is working—with the energy of despair. You watch, Callaghan, you hope, you seek for a way out. Do you see any way, Callaghan? I confess that I can see none."

Before Callaghan could reply Lord Tallbois spoke again, a little more gently.

"I make an exception," he said, "in favour of the youngest member of the assembly—Drummond. Get up, Drummond, and go!"

Drummond gasped faintly and stared at him with dilated eyes, wondering if he were being mocked.

"You will be reasonably safe," said Lord Tallbois, not looking at him, but keeping his gaze fixed on Callaghan. "Your 'Chief' is wrong in declaring I have given away your secret—and I am going to ensure that he does not betray it either. I have never descended to the level of a police spy. Your past connection with this company is wiped out. You

are young; a spark of decency lies hidden in you somewhere—and there is a woman waiting for you. Go, Drummond, and see what you can make of that new life for which I heard you express a desire."

"Do you mean it, Tallbois?" gasped Drummond, trembling.

"Go, you fool!" said Lord Tallbois, harshly, "before it is too late!"

Drummond staggered out through the hut door. None of the others dared to move. The young man looked round him dazedly; the wind of the marshes blew cold upon his face. And then he turned and ran.

Whither he was running Drummond did not know or care. A black horror of what that hut contained was upon him. Sobbing and stumbling, he fled as though death were at his heels; once he fell headlong into a marsh ditch, dragged himself up, and ran on again, drenched and covered with mire.

Somewhere behind he heard the faint crack of a pistol, drowned instantly by a shattering roar; the darkness was split asunder by a flash that lit the marshes far and wide; an invisible force seemed to strike Drummond between the shoulders, and impelled him bodily into a thorn bush.

For a while he lay there, panting and dazed. He raised himself and looked up. The echoes of the explosion were still rumbling over the still river. Where the hut had been a little ring of whitish smoke, like a funeral wreath, rose towards the stars.

Drummond staggered to his feet and continued his flight.

. . . . . .

It was late on the following day when Philip Mottisfont, leaving the Probate Court, encountered Commissioner Mervyn, looking very white and tired.

"It will interest you to hear, Mottisfont," said Mervyn quietly, "that I have failed!"

"Failed!" exclaimed Philip. "Come across to my chambers," he said quickly, "and tell me all about it."

Mervyn shook his head.

"No time. There are many things I must do." He stepped into the empty ante-room of the court, however, and beckoned Philip after him. "I have other news for you, which is also particularly good. I find there will be no difficulty whatever in proving Pedro De Castra's identity up to the hilt, and it will be quite futile for him to try to conceal it. We can trace him now, back to his beginnings."

"And can you hold him?" said Philip.

"Certainly. We are communicating with the United States police, and in due course he will be extradited; there are charges against him there, and it probably means a few years' gaol for him. Come to me in two days' time, and I can put evidence in your hands that will give the full history of Pedro De Castra. Your wife is the only and legitimate daughter of the late William Tallbois, and the peerage is hers. You can establish it in the courts. And I congratulate you and your wife."

"Again you are a good friend to me, Mervyn," said Philip, taking his outstretched hand. "But you said—the late William Tallbois——?"

"Who died two years ago in France," said Mervyn very quietly.

There was a moment's silence. Mottisfont's eyes searched his friend's face.

"You mean more than you have told me," said Philip. "Mervyn, do not leave me in the dark. When I saw you last you were in search of——"

"Callaghan-Vaille-Bell—well-known malefactors, wanted by the police," put in Mervyn.

"And——?"

"John Goodenough, footman, late of Knayth."

"You tell me you have failed, Mervyn. What do you mean by that?"

"You really wish to know?" said Mervyn slowly. "You will not leave things where they are?"

"I must know," said Philip under his breath; "I must know what has become of John Goodenough."

Mervyn closed the door.

"Leaving details aside then," he said, "the facts are these. Acting on information received, I discovered, at the eleventh hour, the hiding-place in London of Callaghan and his two confederates. I just missed apprehending them; when I arrived the birds had flown. A little earlier Brancepeth got on the track of John Goodenough, traced him to Plumstead, and for an hour lost sight of him. Brancepeth wired to me. I did not blame him. I know his difficulties. I followed instantly in a car. At ten-twenty, while I was still a mile from Plumstead, there was a heavy explosion in the distance. I joined Brancepeth, and we found that a hut on the marshes had been blown into matchwood and splinters."

Mervyn laid a finger on Philip's arm.

"Four men died in that explosion," he said quietly.

"Four?" repeated Philip, a little hoarsely.

"Four."

"Are they identified?"

Mervyn looked away.

"There is," he said after a pause, "really nothing to identify."

Philip, very pale, made no answer. The parting words of his guest on the previous night came back to him.

"Mottisfont," said Mervyn gravely, "knowing what you know—remembering what you told me two nights ago—can you reconstruct in your mind the scene that must have taken place in that hut?"

"I can," said Philip under his breath. "I see it very clearly."

"The meeting—the conflict—the finish?"

"Surely. I can see the thing that happened."

"And so can I."

"Can you prove it?'

"Officially," said Mervyn, "I can prove absolutely nothing. The evidence is simply wiped off the face of the earth. And," he added slowly, "I am glad of it."

"Glad?" said Philip. "I thank Heaven for it! There has been unhappiness enough. The dead have had their share of it. Let us not inflict it on the living."

"You need have no fear, Mottisfont. Speaking again unofficially, Scotland Yard does not advertise its failures, especially when no jot of proof exists."

"Callaghan, Vaille, Bell," murmured Philip, "were three. I am thinking of that fourth man."

"Speaking very unofficially," said Mervyn, "I think, on the whole, he died not unworthily."

"*Requiescat*," said Philip, lifting his hat.

"Amen to that!" replied Mervyn gravely, and left the building.

. . . . . .

Philip arrived at the little house in Highgate. He let himself in quietly, and found Joan in the sitting-room.

"Philip!" she said, startled, "what is the matter? How white and serious you look!"

"Do I?" he answered. "I expect I do. And that seems strange, too, for surely this is one of the happiest moments of my life—because I am going to make *you* very happy, Joan!"

"You have always done that," she said, and coming forward she put her hands on his shoulders. "Philip, it isn't in your power, I think, to make me happier than I am!"

"I have wonderful news for you," he said quietly. "Joan, your whole world is reversed again. You are Lady Tallbois of Knayth. And in two months, or less, you will step into your kingdom."

Joan stared at him, blankly. She began to fear he was ill.

"Listen," he said, drawing her onto his knee, "and I will tell you."

He told her the story of Pedro De Castra, and in the simplest language made it all perfectly clear to her. At the end there was a long silence. He felt her trembling, and suddenly she rose. There was

such joy shining in her eyes as he had never seen there yet. She seemed transformed.

"Yes," he said, gently, "you need never fear again, Joan. It is true. The great inheritance is yours. Wealth, title, position, they all return to you."

Joan turned to him with a swift movement.

"Ah!" she cried, almost fiercely, "do you suppose it is of *that* I am thinking? Here is an infinitely greater thing that lifts up my heart; that fills me with happiness. My father—my father was loyal! He never wronged the wife he loved. Those lies are dead—he was loyal to my dear mother, and to me!"

Her voice broke.

"My father! Philip, what would I not give if he had lived to this day. To see the truth triumph—to take the place that he has left for me!"

Philip was silent. He could not meet her eyes. Joan came to him and took his hands.

"Philip," she said, scarcely above a whisper, "a feeling has been with me, so strange and so strong—through all these months, that while you, my darling, were fighting for me and guiding me, there was still another. That my father's spirit was near me—protecting—guarding—standing between me and evil, with a strong and unerring hand, till the victory came and shame departed. And now—tonight——"

"Tonight?" repeated Philip.

"I feel," said Joan, faintly, "that it is ended, and he is with me no more. That I have lost him forever!"

She laid her wet cheek against Philip's, and the joy came back into her eyes.

"Thank God, I have you, my husband!"

CHAPTER XXXIII

THE THREE DEEDS

"I NEVER wanted any of it," groaned the Señora. "I claimed it only for you, Agnes. And now that we have lost all, in Heaven's name tell me I am forgiven."

Agnes De Castra lay on the sofa in the dingy hotel parlour, her chin on her hands, her eyes, encircled with dark rings, stared blankly at the window. It was the fifteenth week after the filing of Joan's claim to Knayth. For days past London had been ringing with the sensation of Joan Mottisfont's triumph.

"Oh!" said Agnes, wearily, "cut the talk of forgiveness. You're my mother; we're both in the same boat. I don't blame you; I guess I'm sorry for you. And what am I?" she laughed bitterly. "A beggar, a pauper, with a father doing five years' gaol in the States.

"Don't ask me to forgive him!" she said, under her breath. "He got half his deserts. I wish I'd got him that night. I'd ha' saved the American Government some expense!"

"Don't, Agnes!" gasped her mother. "Cruel as he was to both of us, remember he is not likely to live the five years, and I dare not judge him. Let it be forgotten. I know your lot is harder than mine."

"No?" said Agnes dully. "Well, I'm just what Joan Mottisfont was, when I turned her out. Now she's turned me out. She's—Lady Tallbois of Knayth."

"Agnes—" said her mother in frightened tones.

"Oh, you needn't be scared. I guess there's no kick left in me," muttered Agnes. "For a while I thought I'd kill her. But what's the use? The goods are hers—they never were mine. They never did me any good. But there's one thing I grudge her. She's got the man she loves!"

Her voice broke in a sob.

"There was none of the rest I'd a right to. But Harold was mine. And—I've lost Harold."

Agnes buried her face in her arms and began to cry piteously. The bitter, vengeful creature that she had been, seemed dead. She cried like a child that has hurt itself—so miserably and helplessly that her mother, with a little moan of pity, came and knelt by her.

"Can you not forget him, Agnes?"

"Never," she sobbed. "Oh, but I love him!"

"It's the way of the world," said her mother sadly. "And he's just a boy. I had a liking for Harold Drummond; he was not vile like those others. But the money's gone, and everything's gone—when that happens a man goes too. He has kept away. Has he said anything?"

Agnes sat up.

"He wrote me a letter, saying that I was the girl he loved"—she smiled bitterly—"but that, for my sake, it was best he shouldn't come to see me—that he was in trouble an' had to lie low. And that he

supposed it was all over, an' that of course I'd soon forget him—but he'd never forget me. Of course," she said, with a touch of contempt, "it was just a get-away. Does he think I'm such a fool as not to see through that?"

"Tell me," said her mother, "knowing what he is, Agnes, would you marry him now—if you could? Doesn't this end it all?"

Agnes drew her shoulders together.

"I would marry," she said, "the man I loved, even if he was broke, or wicked, or hunted. But b'gee!" she added, clenching her hands, "there's one thing I could never marry—a coward!"

She rose, and looked at her mother oddly.

"I've sent for him," she said. "I know where he is, an' I've told him to come here. And he'll come!"

"Here?" exclaimed the Señora faintly, "and at your bidding, Agnes—after all that has passed? Why should he? And what is the use?"

"I bet he'll come," said Agnes rather grimly. "Yes, he'll arrive. An' I think that's his step now. I ought to know it."

"Agnes," said her mother, looking frightened, "you are not going to——"

"Oh, no," said the girl wearily, "I'm not. I'm tame enough to eat out of anybody's hand—I ain't going to break out; don't you be scared." There was a light knock at the door. "Let him in, mother, an' don't you go. I guess I want you here."

Reluctantly, for her heart was fluttering, the Señora opened the door. Drummond stood on the threshold, hat in hand. He looked decidedly pale

and worn; his appearance was seedier than usual; the spruce young dandy that he had been was hardly recognizable. It must be admitted that he cut rather a poor figure.

"Come in, Harold," said Agnes quietly. "Shut the door."

Drummond entered. He looked hesitatingly at the Señora.

"Mother's going to stop," said Agnes with entire decision. "I sent for you, Harold. Got anything to say?"

The young man was dumb.

"I know," said Agnes, looking at him with a longing in her eyes that she could not suppress, "that I ain't kept my side of the bargain, Harold. You promised to marry—Lady Tallbois of Knayth. I ain't that. I can't deliver the goods." She gulped a little. "So it's all over—ain't it?"

"Agnes," he said flushing painfully, "what can I say? You got my letter. You know under what circumstances I became engaged to you. In pity's name, let us say no more of those beginnings. But I loved you," he said, looking straight at her, "and I love you now. Only—I am in worse circumstances than you, Agnes. What hope in the world is there for either of us?"

"That means it's finished," said the girl quietly.

"I am a fugitive," he said. "Safe, perhaps, for the moment. But who knows how long I may even have my liberty?"

Agnes came a step nearer to him, and her eyes hardened.

"I guess I'm the only one who knows that!" she answered. "You're safe enough, except for me! Any one who's kept his ears open can tell that Callaghan and the brutes that worked with him are finished. What about you? You've got away with it! Your tracks are covered, or the cops'd have got you long before this!"

"I have done with all that for ever," said Drummond, very white.

"Yes. But a word from me lands you on the rocks! There's no one living but me can put them wise. Now," she said fiercely, "I've this to say to you. You know me of old, Harold; you know what I am. What if I say this: Make your word good to me, carry out your promise, or I'll say that word before you're an hour older?"

There was dead silence. The Señora trembled. Drummond suddenly braced himself and looked her straight in the face.

"I've only one answer to that, Agnes," he said quietly. "There is a policeman at the corner. Call him in. I see you mean to do it. I know better than to expect mercy from you. I'll take what is coming to me. I have earned it."

He drew a sharp breath.

"I have not sunk so low," he said briefly, "as to be threatened into marriage."

Agnes looked at him oddly.

"Ah!" she whispered, "if you'd said yes—if you'd knuckled down—I'd have called in that cop quicker'n you could turn yourself round!"

Her hands fell to her sides.

"I'm glad," she said breathlessly. "I'm glad you didn't fall for it, Harold!"

She put her hands on his shoulders.

"Don't you want me, Harold?" she said piteously. "Has it got to be good-bye?"

He stirred at her touch; his face showed how deeply he was moved.

"Agnes, how is it possible?" he said wretchedly. "What can we do? I'm done for. I've got to get out of this country——"

"So have I. None of us can stay here."

"I'm a pauper, too. I've nothing left in the world. I mean to work. But I have no living to offer a wife, and as like as not I shall go under. Why drag you with me? We are beggars both." He looked at her despairingly. "Do you see any hope?"

Before Agnes could answer there was a rap at the door. The Señora, with a sense of relief at the interruption, went to open it. The hotel porter handed her a card.

"What is it?" said Agnes listlessly.

"'Mr. James Langley,'" read the Señora. The girl glanced up.

"Langley!" she muttered. "That's Joan's solicitor—the guy that stood for her with Mottisfont in the law-suit. I know what he wants! Have him in!" she said defiantly. "Who cares?"

Mr. Langley, grave and dignified, made his appearance. He bowed formally to the two women. Drummond was hurrying out.

"Mr. Drummond, is it not?" said Langley, de-

taining him. "You will convenience me by remaining. My business concerns you also."

Drummond looked both foolish and apprehensive. But Agnes walked forward and faced the lawyer.

"I'm wise to you!" she said. "You're here on behalf of Lady Tallbois—to pull me for all the money I spent out o' the estate—same as I pulled her! I ain't kicking. Get on an' do it!" she laughed bitterly. "We're all paupers here—we're down an' out. I've no husband to pay up for me!"

Mr. Langley looked at her thoughtfully.

"As you did to Lady Tallbois?" he repeated in a grave voice. "Well, I am here on my client's behalf. You may hear me, and consider the suggestion I bring, if you choose. Or it is open to you to refuse it."

"Get busy an' say your piece," replied Agnes, "and then quit. I'll hear you. You can't get blood out of a stone!"

Mr. Langley seated himself, and spread some papers before him on the table.

"I propose to say," he remarked drily, "that I do not in the least approve of this action. But I am here to carry out my instructions. Here are three legal deeds for your consideration; supposing you agree to the terms they will not be signed and executed till the actual date in question. I will explain them briefly."

He held up a paper and perused it through his glasses.

"The first is a deed of settlement by the Viscountess Tallbois of Knayth, to the Señorita Agnes De Castra, on the date of her marriage to Mr. Harold

Drummond, to be considered as a dowry—the sum of five thousand pounds."

Agnes looked perfectly stupefied. Her lips trembled; the colour ebbed and flowed in her cheeks.

"The second is a similar deed, by Viscountess Tallbois, to Mr. Harold Drummond, on the date of his marriage to the Señorita Agnes De Castra—the sum of five thousand pounds."

Drummond made a faint noise in his throat.

"The third, a deed of gift—unconditional—to the Señora Mercedes De Castra, which it is hoped she will accept—ten thousand pounds."

Mr. Langley's voice died upon an impressive stillness.

"I propose to add, in my capacity as legal representative, that, in the event of your accepting, we consider you are all more suited to a warmer climate" —he coughed primly—"than that of England." He distributed a bow between the three. "I mean, of course, Florida, or some such country. What answer am I to take back with me?"

Neither Agnes nor Drummond were capable of speech. They met each other's eyes, and there was no need for words. It was the Señora who spoke. Two fat tears rolled down her cheeks.

"Tell Lady Tallbois," she said in a trembling voice, "that I can only pray God bless her. This is a black world, but there is one angel in it at least."

"I say so, too," said Agnes faintly, "though she won't care to hear it—from me."

Mr. Langley bowed silently and withdrew, taking his papers with him. Drummond had still been

unable to make any reply. Shame burned his very soul. But he turned his eyes longlingly on Agnes. Before either of them could speak, the Señora gave a little cry.

"I am an old fool!" she said, fumbling in her pocket with a shaking hand and bringing out a letter which she looked at through tear-dimmed eyes. "This came by the last post—I forgot it—I think it must be from *her*. Take it, Agnes; I cannot read English very well."

Agnes opened the letter; it was addressed to her, and read it aloud.

You will not care to see me; I wish to spare you any possible pain. I hope you will not refuse the little I can do.

Go to the man who loves you, Agnes. That is the only thing that matters at all.—JOAN.

There was a pause. Agnes and Drummond turned to each other, with hands outstretched.

The Señora, mopping her yellow cheeks and sobbing happily, slipped out of the room.

. . . . . .

Ten days later Mr. and Mrs. Harold Drummond, accompanied by the Señora Mercedes De Castra, sailed on the S.S. *Guadeloupe* for Key West.

. . . . . .

On a summer day, several years after the events just related, Lady Dunluce (white-haired now and amiable as ever, and still avid of Romance) alighted

from her car in front of Knayth Abbey, and walked towards the terrace.

On the path between the cedars she was confronted by a very small boy with frank, light blue eyes and chubby legs. A small boy so extraordinarily sturdy that he looked as if nothing could knock him down.

"How do you do?" he said with grave courtesy. "I hope you are vewwy well?"

"Thank you, Philip. I find myself in enviable health," said Lady Dunluce, who was a great friend of his. "By the way, have you heard what they are going to do with your papa?"

"Yeth. He is going to be a Chancellor," said Philip pensively. "I think it will be wather dull."

"He will like it," chuckled Lady Dunluce. "They will make him a lord."

"Is that because of mother?"

"Oh, no. All off his own bat."

"My papa is a gweat man," said the infant cheerfully. "And I am vewwy fond of him. But he will only be a new lord. And I," he added, surveying serenely the towers of Knayth, "am a vewwy old lord."

At that moment Joan and Philip came round the shrubbery together. And Philip hoisted the very old lord high upon his shoulder, and the meeting dissolved in laughter.

THE END

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